

love you like a love song by FateChica

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Summary:

For 353 days, Mike has lived without El. For 353 days, El has watched from afar and wished.

Then the counting ends and the rest of their lives begin.

-A story about growing up and growing together

1. Nov 1983 - Nov 1984

Nov 1983 - Nov 1984

For Mike, meeting El is like finding the part of him that is missing. Of course, he doesn't know it at first. A lot happens in those first few days – Will's disappearance, the search for him, meeting El, finding out about her, about her *powers*. It's only once she's gone, a cloud of ash in the classroom where she and the Demogorgon once stood, his voice echoing in the empty space with the shape of her name, that it hits him: he wasn't whole until he met her and now a part of him is gone.

At first, it sits inside of him like a stone, a part of him hollowed out centered in his heart. He grieves in his mother's arms, a child longing for the comfort of his mom. But the missing claws at him, digs further inside, and he can't run from it.

And so it lives inside of him, growing, gnawing away at the boy he used to be, until he feels like a shell of his former self. And every time he calls out for her on the SuperCom ("*El, it's me, Mike. Are you there?*"), the silence that echoes back gives the hollow the strength to chip away at him just that much more.

For 353 days, Mike grows and decays. He grows taller, angrier, and no one can see that half of him is missing.

A moody teenager, his mom says, disappointed. "He'll grow out of it. If not, there are ways to straighten him out, turn him into a man," Mike overhears his dad saying to his mom when they think he's not nearby.

Mike seethes. His nails dig into his palms from tightly clenched fists. It's all he can do to keep from shouting back at them *can't you see? You don't understand*. And they don't; they never will. The demons, the government lab, El's powers, what the bad men did to her – the horrors he's seen. You don't go through that and not come out the other side older and wiser than you were before.

But Mike swallows the anger, a bitter lump settling into his stomach,

and misses El just that much more.

It's the worst at night. With only his thoughts for company, Mike can't keep his mind from spinning, from racing. *Where is she? Is she ok? How is she doing?* He thinks about her, about what she looks like, and tries to keep the image of her from fading. He thinks about the first time she smiled at him, the way she looked in Nancy's old dress, how she pushed herself to contact Will for them, even though she was scared. He thinks about the last time he saw her, heard her voice with its soft "*goodbye, Mike*" as she looked at him over her shoulder with sad eyes.

And he never, *never* thinks about that kiss. *Heart pounding in his chest as he leans over. The warm press of her lips against his. The look of shock fading into a breathless smile.*

No, he never thinks about it. Instead, he *dreams* about it. Soft, gentle dreams in the pre-dawn hours; warmth spreading in his chest; a smile tugging at his lips. And then he wakes, the dream ripped away and reality rushes back in.

El is still missing. And he's still incomplete.

But El's not missing. She's here, watching from the Void.

Blackness surrounds her, but Mike is at the center and the inky depths cease to matter. She watches him, calling out to her from the fort that was her first home. She wants to reach out for him, wants to be able to touch him, but she can't. It makes her ache, like it has for days on end.

"El, it's me. It's day 147. Are you there? Please say something, I just need-" He cuts off abruptly, eyes clenching shut for half a second. Whatever Mike wants to say, he holds back like it hurts to do so. El desperately wants to know what he was going to say.

"My day was ok. We had stupid quiz in English today that I forgot to

study for, but Lucas made a joke that had Dustin spraying milk out his nose, he was laughing so hard. So it all evened out, I guess.” A ghost of a smile crosses his lips and the sight sets off butterflies in El’s heart.

But the smile is gone as fast as it appears. “I miss you.” The words are so small, Mike’s voice so hushed, if El hadn’t been kneeling next to him, she never would have heard him say it. As it is, the words are a punch to the stomach and El can’t help but gasp.

“I miss you, too,” she says through the thickness in her throat. “I’m right here.” Tears pool at the edge of her eyelids. And even though she knows it’s dumb, she finds herself reaching out for him.

“I know you’re out there somewhere. I have to believe it. Just tell me you’re ok, ok? I...”

El’s hand brushes up against Mike’s cheek and even though she can’t feel him, her palm still tingles with heat.

Mike stops talking, mouth agape, brows furrowed above eyes that fill with a painful hope. “El?” He looks around for her, at her, *through* her, and a soft sob drops from her lips. He can’t see her. But she’s *here*.

In a fury of motion, the moment ends. Mike heaves a sigh and falls back among the blankets of the fort. “This is so stupid,” he says to no one. His lower lip trembles and the hand not holding the SuperCom brushes roughly over his eyes.

Then he’s pushing the antenna back in and rushing to get up to leave the basement, to leave her.

He doesn’t even say goodbye.

Another sob tumbles out and El reaches up to rip the blindfold from her eyes. The static from the radio rushes back into her ears and it hides the sound of her tears.

For almost 100 days since she came to live with Hopper, she’s been reaching out to Mike through the Void, desperate to see him and buoyed by how he hasn’t forgotten her. She’s watched him grow and

cry and laugh and hasn't been there for any of it.

Soon is what Hop tells her. Soon, she can go outside. Soon, she can be allowed to leave the cabin and see her friends. Soon, she can be with Mike and have him see her in return.

But somehow, Soon never comes and, some days, feels like it never will.

Notes for the Chapter:

My first fanfic in years. Yeesh, I'm out of practice...

2. Nov 4 - Nov 5 1984

Notes for the Chapter:

Haha, whoops. Kept writing even though I got hella meetings tomorrow (today?...what time is it, really?...what is time?).

#cantstopwontstop

Nov 4 - Nov 5 1984

He's going to die.

If Mike's going to be completely honest with himself, it should have happened many times before. He's just gotten lucky up until this point. And now that luck has run out.

The Demodogs are outside, circling. Their growling howls pierce through the walls of the Byers' home. Everyone stands in the middle of the living room, pressed together. Almost everyone has a weapon.

Mike has a candlestick. This is also how he knows he's going to die. What's he going to do with a freakin' *candlestick*?

But then there's the sounds of the bushes rustling violently and his heart leaps into his throat. The growls stop. A high-pitched whine. Then the crash of glass shattering, a shape flying through the rain of shards.

Everyone cries out. It's a Demodog, but it's just lying there, limp, against the bottom of the sofa.

Holy shit. – Is it dead?

The creak of the porch step whips everyone's attention towards the front door. Something's there. Oh god, if that thing killed the Demodog, what are *they* going to do?

Mike swallows, ducking behind Hopper as the older man moves forward, and cranes his neck to see what horror is coming for them

now.

The door swings open, but what steps in isn't a what. It's a *who*.

The figure steps into the house – small, lithe, teenage girl shaped – and Mike finds himself moving without thinking. He pushes past Hopper, mouth hanging open, unable to believe what, who, he's seeing.

It's El.

Something in him clicks into place. *Oh, there you are.*

The sight of her is so glorious he could cry. He's smiling like an idiot, but he doesn't care. El's alive, she's here, and she's looking at him like she's as happy to see him as he is her.

El looks nothing like he expects and everything like he remembers. She's dressed strange, like something out of the pages of a magazine, or off a rock album cover, or something. Smudged rings of black makeup surround her eyes, her hair (god, *her hair*) is slicked back and away from her face.

Mike's never seen anyone more beautiful.

He could sooner stop the earth from spinning than he could stop his feet from carrying him to her and before he knows it, he's in front of her, reaching for her.

He says her name with breathless hope and El responds with her own gasp of his name. He hasn't heard her voice in almost a year and he can't believe he'd almost forgotten how it sounds (light, breathy, like a bell on a clear day) as he crashes into her, his arms wrapping around her.

Mike's breathing hard as he burrows into where her neck meets her shoulder, completely overcome with emotion. The feel of her hands clutching at his back threatens to make him lose it completely and he swallows down the lump in his throat. He's *not* going to cry, he just isn't.

But she holds him so tight and her breath tickles his ear and she's so

warm in his arms, so wonderfully warm and real and *here*. He doesn't care if everyone's watching – he's never going to let her go.

His hands won't stay still as they press against her back. He can't decide which part of her he wants to touch, can't figure which inch of her will convince him that she's really here, that he's not dreaming.

Mike needs to see her face, so he pulls back, his hands going to her elbows. He looks down into El's face. When did he get taller than her? (Better question: why does he like it so much?)

There's a trickle of blood coming from her nose – a casualty of her fight against the Demodog – but she's looking at him like nothing else matters.

"I never gave up on you." His voice cracks a bit, but that's more from emotion than anything. "I called you every night. *Every night* for-"

El cuts him off, looking sad. Why-? "353 days." He gasps. Was she...? "I heard."

No. Mike crumbles a bit. He suddenly can't catch his breath and it feels like he's freefalling. It hurts more than he expects, the words she's saying. "Why didn't you tell me you were there? That you were ok?" God, he needs to know. He's not mad, but...why?

"Because I wouldn't let her."

That's Hopper's voice from behind him and the real world comes crashing down on top of him. He watches, feeling like a stranger in his own body, as Hopper comes forward.

"What the hell is this? Where've you been?"

"Where have *you* been?" El asks in response as Hopper pulls her into a hug.

The pieces come together in a picture that lodges something loose inside of Mike, the beginning of a chain reaction. The bottom falls out of his stomach. "You've been hiding her. You've been hiding her the whole time!" He shoves Hopper, all but hitting him.

“Hey, hey!” Hopper grabs him by the collar. “Let’s talk. Alone.”

Away from the living room, door to Will’s room shut behind them, Hopper tells him he was protecting her, asking Mike to understand, to not blame El.

It’s ridiculous. The whole thing is *fucking* ridiculous. Mike could never blame El. *Never*. But she was *here the whole time* and he can’t understand why didn’t anyone tell him? Couldn’t they see what was wrong with him? God, he needs her and she’s been so close, under his nose, for months and they just let him suffer?

Before he knows what’s happening and unable to stop even if he wants to, Mike’s lashing out at Hopper, hitting and punching him with all the strength in his thin body. And then he feels Hopper’s arms around him in a tight bear hug and Mike just loses it. Everything he’s been bottling up, every hollow space, just shatters.

And it *hurts*. God, does it hurt. It pours out of him in waves and scrapes at his soul, like scrubbing out a wound, one that’ll leave a horrendous scar.

But, for the first time in almost a year, Mike feels whole. And, for now, that’s enough.

Everything hurts. Every inch of her feels like something slammed into it. And the light coming in from whatever window is nearby is not helping anything.

El groans and shifts, sheets rustling beneath her. Why does everything hurt?

Memory rushes in, filling in the blanks. The Mind Flayer, the elevator with Hopper, closing the Gate...seeing her friends, reuniting with Mike, getting to touch him, hold him...

Her eyes snap open and El breathes in a sharp, quiet gasp of air.

She's lying in an unfamiliar bedroom (*Will's house?*). Someone, probably Hopper, removed her shoes and her jacket, leaving her in a sleeveless tee shirt and jeans. And lying next to her, on top of the covers, is Mike, fast asleep.

A smile spreads over El's face despite the soreness she feels everywhere. He's here, so close she can touch him. But she doesn't, not just yet. Instead, she drinks him in, taking a second to commit the moment to memory.

Mike lays inches away, one hand tucked under his head, the other resting just under his chin. Dark circles under his eyes are a sharp contrast to the freckles that dot the landscape of his nose and cheeks. His mouth is relaxed, lips parted in sleep, and El smiles all the wider. He looks so relaxed, so different from the sadness and anger she's seen over the past year. This is the boy she met all those days ago. Sure, the roundness in his cheeks is disappearing, jawline and cheekbones carved in the spaces the roundness left behind, but it's still *Mike* and that's what matters.

The thought brings tears to El's eyes and she swallows tightly to keep the rest at bay. Instead, she channels the emotion into leaning forward, unable to resist pressing her lips against Mike's forehead. His skin is warm to the touch and soft, so soft as she breathes him in.

She settles back down so she can look at him. Her hand rests on his shoulder, but she slowly drags it across Mike's chest so it rests over his heart. The steady beat pulses beneath her palm and El once again feels the surge of emotions swell inside her.

Under her watchful gaze, Mike's eyes begin to twitch as sleep fades away. A few seconds later, his eyes flutter open. He looks a little confused. "El?"

El feels her heart skip a beat at the timbre of his voice and she shivers a bit. Sleep has roughened the pitch of his voice, which has changed dramatically in the past year. Of all the ways Mike's changed over the past year, this is her favorite. "Yes," she finds enough of her own voice to say.

The hand under Mike's chin snakes out to grab at her waist and

either pull her towards him or him towards her, El's not sure. He presses his forehead against hers and El can hear him sigh in relief. "You're ok, you're ok."

There's an electrifying, giddy feeling settling into her stomach at how close Mike is and she smiles. "I promised and-"

"Friends don't lie," Mike finishes for her. A smile spreads over his lips. "I can't believe you're really here. I always-" He breaks off, voice choking with emotion.

El knows how he feels. Her fingers curl into his shirt. "I know, Mike. I know."

Mike looks down at El's hand pressed against his chest and El blushes. She's ready to take her hand away, but Mike's other hand lands on top of hers, pressing her palm tightly against him. "Don't," he says softly, "It's nice."

El nods and luxuriates in the warmth of his touch, her hand trapped against his body. His heart is beating faster now and El finds her own marching in time to match it.

"El?"

Somewhere along the line, El's eyes slipped shut. At the sound of Mike's voice, they flutter open. "Yes?"

He smiles at her, lips gently curving. "I'm glad you're back. I missed you."

It's all so overwhelming, being so close to Mike, touching him, hearing him say those words. El does the only thing she can think of: she kisses him.

It's a brief kiss, much like their first. A quick touch of her lips to his, warmth spreading through both of them. She pulls back and looks at Mike's face. He looks surprised for half a second before a giant grin takes over his face. He pulls her even closer, so close El has to tuck her head under Mike's chin, his arm draping over her waist.

"I missed you, too," she whispers against his neck.

“Never leave?”

El smiles, her heart threatening to pound its way out of her chest.
“Never.”

Notes for the Chapter:

I just love these kids. So cute, so in love. *smooshes them together*

for serious, someone give Finn all the awards for the Mike/El reuniting scenes. boy's done earned them

3. Nov 1984

Notes for the Chapter:

Boom shakalaka, bitches

Nov 1984

Morning, as it always seems to, comes too early for Jim. Especially this morning. Once again, it seems they've managed to stop the world from ending and he's left dealing with the aftermath.

So, Jim stands in the Byers' living room, nicotine from an early morning smoke humming in his blood, and takes stock. Everyone has all their limbs and any harm is mostly contained to bumps and bruises, though Harrington has a nasty broken nose – a story Jim wasn't able to weasel out any of the kids last night.

He'll try again later.

As far as he knows, he's the only one awake. The couch, with debris still scattered across the floor, is half-covered with the blanket he used last night. Wincing at a twinge in his knee, Jim turns to do a sweep of the house, just to make sure. Old habits die hard, especially for grizzled police chiefs.

First, he peers inside Joyce's room. The whole Byers family is asleep on the queen-sized bed, Will squeezed between Joyce and Jonathan. The kid still looks really pale, and there are dark circles and haggard lines on both Joyce and Jonathan's faces, but the family is still here, still kicking.

Next is Jonathan's room. Nancy Wheeler and that red-headed girl are asleep on the bed, with Steve Harrington and the rest of the Teenage Horde on the floor. Harrington breathes with wheezing breaths through that nose – *Jesus, did no one set it last night?* – but the room is mostly filled with the sounds of soft breathing.

A quick head-count comes up one short, though, and a visual scan of the room shows a distinct lack of the Wheeler kid's black mop of hair.

Jim lets out a grumbling sigh. Of fucking course. He should have figured.

Like he suspects, he finds Mike with El. The two of them are asleep on Will's bed – her under the covers, him lying on top of them – and Jim leans back against Will's desk to watch the two of them.

They're lying inches apart, bodies turned to face each other, and dammit, Jim supposes he should play the over-protective father and separate them, but he can't find the heart to do it. Sure, they're 13 going on Living, Breathing Hormones, but he'll be damned if there's not something a little precious about the two of them lying there. There's a devotion between them that most adults can't seem to achieve and while Jim's not sure what the future is going to bring, he has a feeling Wheeler's going to be a long-term addition to whatever hodge-podge family unit Jim and El have cobbled together.

Besides, if he tries anything she doesn't like, she can just throw him across the room with her mind. The thought comforts Jim, but his brain quickly retorts, *yeah, but what if she likes what he tries?*

Well, shit.

Maybe he'll ask Joyce to give El the Talk, or something.

With a sigh, Jim quietly extracts himself from Will's bedroom. He suddenly, and very desperately, needs coffee.

There's a bit of rummaging through the remains of the kitchen for coffee supplies and, though there's no cream or anything (since the entire contents of the refrigerator are on the floor for reasons Jim is afraid to even ask about), Jim's soon sitting at the kitchen table with a mug of black coffee.

The heat and the caffeine balance each other out and Jim sits and thinks, lets himself exist in the moment. He survived, El survived – hell, *everyone* survived (*not Bob, though*, a corner of his mind whispers) – so he figures he's earned a moment of just existing.

He's not sure how long he sits out there until someone finally joins him. The sound of footsteps draws his attention and Jim looks over as

Joyce walks into the kitchen. “Is that coffee I smell?” her voice is raspy with sleep and Jim tries his damndest to ignore the specter of the dead man in the room.

“It is as long as you don’t mind it without cream.”

Joyce doesn’t need to ask; she instead looks at the mess on her kitchen floor and shakes her head. “I have sugar. It’ll be fine.”

She joins him moments later, her own cup of coffee cradled in between her palms. They sit and the quiet lingers over them for a long stretch. “So, you think this is a yearly thing, now?” Jim says. “Every fall, another world saving?”

A harsh sigh puffs out Joyce’s cheeks as it escapes her. “God, I hope not. Especially since the kids always end up right in the middle of it.”

“My nightmare scenario,” Jim says, agreeing.

Joyce cocks her head, looking at him through narrowed eyes, and Jim feels the hackles rise on the back of his neck. “You’ve been hiding El for almost a year. How?”

“I got a cabin out in the woods just outside town.” Something inside Jim clicks open; he can *finally* talk about this with someone. “I found her out in the woods Christmas Eve. You shoulda seen her, Joyce.” The memory, crystal clear, jumps to the forefront of his mind and Jim sucks in a deep breath. “Thin as a twig, covered in dirt, clothes torn up...I had to take her in, had to keep her somewhere safe. You know what would have happened if that lab found her. You know what they did to her.” His breathing’s ragged, heart pounding painfully in his chest. Somewhere along the way, El became his little girl and the thought of what happened to her, what can still happen to her, angers and terrifies him at the same time

“You saved her,” Joyce says. She reaches out and lays a hand atop his forearm. The warmth of her touch seeps into his skin. “You gave her a home.”

Jim meet’s Joyce’s gaze. Her eyes shine with emotion and it reaches deep inside Jim’s heart, warming him in a way nothing has in years.

"I tried. I'm still trying." He lets out a small laugh, trying to cut through the thick emotion that sits like a black hole in his chest. "It's not easy when the kid can throw stuff across the room with her mind." Having someone talk to about this, about the god damn weirdness in his life, is a burden lifting off his chest like a weight he didn't even know he was carrying until it's no longer there.

Joyce giggles, shaking her head at the thought. "Just wait until she's older."

"*Fuck*," Jim whispers, head bowing for a moment. "You don't want to know what happened when I tried to ground her *now*. Not to mention, there's no way I'm going to keep that Wheeler kid – or any of the rest of them, for that matter – away from her now that they know she's here."

Joyce pins him in place with a *look*. "She deserves to have friends, Jim. I know you want to keep her safe, but there has to be a way to let them see her, too."

She's right, Jim knows this. It's not fair to keep El hidden away from the world. Still.... "I'll figure something out."

And Jim does. With the help of the kids, because of course.

We can have a signal! – Ooh, she can hide under a blanket in the back of the Chief's car! – Guys, guys, wait, what happens if someone stops him? – Dustin, he's the police chief. Who's going to stop him? – ...Good point.

Their ideas are pretty good, as it turns out. It makes Jim worry for the future. *Too sneaky for their own good.*

Still, they come to an arrangement: they can all meet at the Byers' house on the weekends and no more than one school night a week. Jim will drive El over, hidden under a blanket in the back seat. Occasionally, they can play outside once the weather improves, but only away from town. And, as long as they schedule it ahead of time,

the kids can come visit her at the cabin.

“No showing up unannounced,” Jim tells them.

“No unplanned visits, we promise!”

The moment he hears the words, Jim realizes that’s a promise that’ll never be kept. Well, shit.

But the look on El’s face – a soft, giddy smile, her gaze bouncing back and forth between him and Mike, looking more like a kid than Jim’s ever seen – makes it all worth it.

Has me wrapped around her little finger. And Jim can’t find it in him to regret it one bit.

It’s been two weeks since El closed the Gate and the Mind Flayer was forced out of Will. The superficial wounds have healed and the emotional ones are still scabbing over. But they’re healing one day at a time, growing around the wounds and scars, growing older as a result.

The Saturday before Thanksgiving finds the entire Party gathered at Will’s house...well, the entire Party minus Max. She’s grounded until after Thanksgiving for not telling anyone where she was going and spending all night out of the house the night they closed the Gate. It’s totally bogus, which is what Lucas tells Max every time he sees her in school, but there’s nothing anyone can do.

So, it’s the 5 of them at Will’s house with Jonathan and Nancy “chaperoning”, while both Mrs. Byers and the Chief are working. The boys are playing Sorry! while El sits nestled next to Mike. Lucas can’t help but steal glances at them out of the corner of his eye. Every so often, El asks a question and Mike turns to answer, his voice low so it doesn’t bother the flow of play. It’s really...intimate, is the only word Lucas can think of, from the pitch of Mike’s voice, to the way El’s gaze dances across Mike’s face as she watches him answer, to the

small smiles they exchange.

It's weird; a month ago, Lucas would have been grossed out by the lovey-dovey display. But now, it brings up a complicated swirl of emotion: relief that his friend has returned to them, that she's ok; happy that Mike's getting his old self back (not entirely, though – there's still a lot of anger and sadness lurking in the air around Mike, but El's presence works minor miracles).

But the predominant emotion that fills Lucas is envy, plain and simple. It's different than the weird envy he felt when he spied Nancy and Jonathan making out on his way to the bathroom earlier – that was the kind where he wonders if he and Max would, *could*, ever get to that point and what it must feel like to be able to be with a girl that way.

No, this envy is deeper. Mike's so damn comfortable around El, so open with his feelings. It's like he knows he's got a second chance and he's grabbing it with both hands. So Mike looks at El like she hung the moon in the sky and no amount of gentle ribbing from the guys makes him the slightest bit embarrassed.

To be fair, Lucas doesn't know if he'd be embarrassed if the girl he likes – *Max* – looked at him the way El looks at Mike, like she's relieved to have him next to her and unable to believe he is at the same time.

There's just a certainty to Mike and El, like they know who they are and how they feel about each other and none of that is ever going to change. Like the law of gravity, or something just as fundamental. That's what Lucas envies, that certainty. He doesn't know how desperately he wants to be one half of a whole until he watches Mike and El together.

Someday, Lucas hopes. Someday

Dustin calls for a snack break after Will wins at Sorry! and the 5

teenagers all stand up off the floor. El moves to follow Will and Lucas, but the feel of a warm hand encircling her wrist stops her.

El spins to look at Mike, who looks a little nervous despite the small smile on his face. "Hey, can I talk to you for a sec? Away from the others?"

El's stomach does a funny flip. She hasn't had a moment alone with Mike since waking up next to him the morning after closing the Gate. "Ok," she says, trying not to seem too excited (she fails spectacularly, of course).

Mike pulls her deeper into the living room, away from the kitchen and into the shadows at the edge of the light. "So, um, you see, the thing is...I was wondering if..." Mike closes his eyes and shakes his head. "This is not how it's supposed to go," he says under his breath.

Mike's still holding on to El's hand and she can feel the tension and nerves from the way his grip tightens and turns sweaty. "Mike," she says, quiet and forceful. Mike opens his eyes and El locks gazes with him. "It's ok." She smiles at him with what she's hoping is encouragement.

Mike sighs and seems to relax a little. "The Snow Ball is coming up," he says, not pausing before launching into the rest of his words, picking up speed with each passing second. "You remember? I told you about it last year? I wanted to take you, but then you went away and I didn't get the chance to ask you right. And, I was hoping – did you still want to go? We don't have to go *together-together*, but-"

It's adorable and a little pathetic and El's heart just melts. She takes the hand Mike's not holding and presses it over Mike's mouth, effectively shutting him up. "*Mike*," she says through a giggle. "Yes, I will go with you." She removes her hand and, before Mike can say anything, she leans in to give him a quick peck on the cheek. "Now, come. Let's go eat with the others." She smiles at the dazed look on Mike's face and turns to join the others.

Mike knows he looks like all kinds of idiot as he watches El saunter away from him and into the kitchen, but he doesn't care. The girl he likes (*loves*, a voice in the back corner of his mind whispers, but Mike ignores it; too big and too scary for now) agreed to go to the Snow Ball with him, *just him*.

His face tingles from where her hand was pressed against his mouth and from where her lips grazed his cheek. He feels like he's been floating for the past couple of weeks and now he's above the clouds where nothing can weigh him down. El's back, she's here, and she wants to be with him.

It's official: Mike Wheeler is the luckiest guy on the planet.

Notes for the Chapter:

Y'all know what's coming up next. Like I could skip the Snow Ball...psh...

4. Dec 1984

Notes for the Chapter:

God bless these two melodramatic, adorable teenagers.

Dec 1984

*~*The Snow Ball*~*

The day of the Snow Ball dawns bright and clear, not a cloud in the sky.

It's a sign; it *has* to be, Mike thinks. The last time he saw El, only a few days ago, she was telling him that Hopper was still trying to figure out if El could go out where there were so many people.

Mike had tried not to get his hopes up, but El's news had been more disappointing than he could have imagined. This is his last chance to follow through on the promise of the Snow Ball.

(Yes, Hawkins High has the Winter Formal, but it's *not the same*.)

Still, Mike pushes on through the day. Ever since he told his mom he's going to the Snow Ball and confessed that he kinda, sorta, maybe has a date, she's been fawning all over him, smiling at him with a strange, relieved look on her face. She insists on taking him, ugh, *clothes shopping*, since, and Mike can quote, "You've been growing like a weed, Michael Wheeler. I will not have you dressed like a bum at your first school dance in clothes that don't fit."

So, Mike let his mom drag him through Sears and he suffers through getting posed and dressed like a doll and having his inseam measured (seriously, on the list of people with who Mike's comfortable letting their hands near his, um, *stuff*, this tailor in the boys department is way down at the bottom. Like, *waaaaay* down. Pit-of-despair down. He also doesn't let himself think about where El sits on that list. Nope, not at all, absolutely *not* going there, *denial is a river in Egypt, I don't know what you're talking about*).

In the end, he walks away (or, rather, his mother *makes* him walk away) with a couple new pairs of slacks and dress shirts, plus a sweater-jacket combination *thing* that his mother claims makes him look “darling”. Mike’s effort to keep from rolling his eyes is so damn near herculean, he deserves a medal. But, really, there’s a part of him that’s glad to be on the right foot with his mom. It beats having her look at him like he makes her sad all the time.

On the evening of the Snow Ball, he gets dressed and lets his mother hover near by while he tries to tame his hair and is too busy thinking about El to care. There’s a nervous electricity that runs across his skin and through his veins, like scattered lightning dancing across the sky.

He loses his patience a little when his mom insists on taking a *million* pictures of him at the foot of the stairs – *You look so handsome!* – and this time, he can’t keep from rolling his eyes. “Mom!”

Then, finally, he’s at the dance. In 20 years, Mike’ll look back on this night and realize how cheesy and shoestring the whole thing was, but, tonight? There’s magic in the air. It’s a winter wonderland, full of lights and snowflakes. El’s going to love it. Sure, El’s not *here* yet, but she’s coming. She *has* to be.

Slowly, the rest of the party trickles in and Dustin shows up with *that hair* (Dustin’s hair is so magnificent, it becomes the 7th Party member and the rest of them never let him forget it) and for a while, it’s fun and happy. There’s music and dancing and punch and Mike lets himself not worry so much.

But then a slow song comes up and they start pairing off one by one. Except for Mike. Because there’s only one girl in the whole world he wants to dance with. And she’s not here.

That sound that no one but him hears? That’s the sound of his heart imploding.

El is a frazzled ball of longing and anxiety. She hopes and prays and

wishes for days. Nancy comes by with a dress and makeup during one of their tutoring sessions. Joyce gives her tips on how to do her hair and makeup. And, still, Hop has no news for her, no announcement of if she can go to the Snow Ball or not.

It's so unfair, El wants to *die*.

It gets to be two days before the main event without an answer. El's convinced she's never going to get to go and she's not going to see Mike at the dance and he's going to be so mad she broke her promise, made him break *his* promise. She just wants to cry.

But then, Hop comes home and tells her she can go to the Snow Ball with a big smile on his face (not as big as the smile when he came home with a birth certificate that has her first name and his last name on it, but close. Really close). El shrieks and launches herself at Hop, hugging him tight. "Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you!" she croons.

"Don't thank me yet, kid. We still gotta figure out hair and makeup. Especially if you want to look pretty for your little boyfriend." The word "boyfriend" brings a blush to El's cheeks. She watches the soaps; she *knows* what a boyfriend is and the things women do with their boyfriends in those shows make El feel warm and tingly all over. She gets lost down in the rabbit hole of imagining her and Mike like one of the couples in her shows, with all the kissing – *different kinds!* – and the touching, and all that *passion*, so lost that she floats over Hopper's, what turns out to be, very valid concern.

So, now it's 45 minutes *after* they were supposed to leave and El's trying not to cry in distress as Hop attempts to do something with her hair. She's determined not to ruin her makeup (not after getting it *just right*), but she's late, so late. Fear that Mike might not be there once she does get there (*if* she gets there), bubbles up in her stomach, sour and gross.

"Joyce said to-" she starts (again) with a petulant whine, but Hopper cuts her off.

"Well, Joyce isn't here, is she?" Hopper shoots back, the frustration in his tone making El jump. Something must have shown on her face in

the mirror because not a split second later, Hop sighs. "Look, El, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap at you."

"It's ok," El says, trying to keep her lower lip from trembling. "I know you're helping. It's just..."

"I know, kid, I know," Hopper says so she doesn't have to. "Come on, we're almost finished. 5 minutes, I promise."

Well, Hopper one ups his promise this time because, in less than 5 minutes, they're in his cruiser and headed for town.

The ride over is quiet except for El's excited, anxious breathing. She's wound so tightly, she feels like she might shatter into a million pieces.

"The dance'll still be going when you get there," Hopper says as they near the school. Only a couple of minutes away, by El's reckoning.

"Really?"

Hopper lets out a snuffling breath that El has come to associate with his quiet laughter. "Really. These things tend to go a few hours, at least."

A few hours? And she's already so late! What if Mike found someone else to go to the Snow Ball with, since she's not there?

"He'll be waiting for you, kid."

It's only when Hopper speaks that El realizes she was speaking out loud. "How do you know?" she asks, looking over at him.

They pull into the parking lot and it's clear Hopper's looking for what to say as he parks the car. "Listen to me carefully, because I'm only going to say this once," he says as he kills the engine. There's a serious look on Hopper's face that has El enthralled. "That boy looks at you like you're the best thing to ever happen - not just to him, but *ever*. He called out to you every night for almost a year-

"353 days," El interjects.

Hopper lets out a sharp breath. “353 days,” he repeats. “He’s not about to give up on you that easy. He cares about you a lot, kid, just as much as you care about him.” Hopper coughs and opens the car door. “Now, you tell Wheeler any of what I just said and there’ll be hell to pay. I’m talking no Eggos for a month, you get me?”

El smiles and opens her car door. “I get you.”

“Good.” Both car doors slam. “Now, I’m going to be waiting here outside. Once the dance ends, come and find me. You then get 5 minutes to say goodbye to your friends before we gotta go, ok?”

“Ok.” Before she goes in, El rushes around the front of the cruiser and collides with Hopper in a tight bear hug. “Thanks, Hop.”

She feels Hop’s arms wrap around her tight, so tight. “Any time, kid,” he says, voice soft and thick. She pulls away, all smiles and nerves. “Now, have fun in there.”

“I will.”

It takes her a little bit to navigate through to the doors into the gym. She can see the decorations through the door windows, the same ones she saw Max and Mike through, when she knocked Max off her skateboard (*need to apologize for that*).

Suddenly, it’s hard to breathe. She’s here, she’s *finally here*. She doesn’t know what to expect, but she knows Mike *really* wanted to do this with her, and that’s all she needs. Anticipation buzzes across her skin and causes her heart to speed up so she almost can’t catch her breath. All it takes is one big gulp of air, then she’s pushing the doors open and she’s inside and...

Mike somehow finds himself sitting, almost slumped over. *She’s not coming, is she?* Disappointment feels like a weight tied to his heart, pulling him down into the depths. But *something* has him looking in the direction of the gym doors and, suddenly, the weight’s gone and

Mike no longer knows how to breathe.

El's here.

He rushes to his feet and just stands there for a second, drinking in the sight of her. He's never, *never*, seen anything or *anyone* more beautiful in his entire, short life. Every nerve on his body feels alive in ways he never thought possible and it's not a foregone conclusion that his heart isn't going to just jump out of his chest, it's beating so fast. His breathing tries to keep up, but it just can't and he's so overwhelmed. He's aware he must be looking at her like an idiot (*again*), but he really can't help himself. She just short circuits his brain every time.

And then she sees him from across the gym and the whole world fades away except for the two of them.

It's like a magnet that pulls the two of them towards each other until they're standing inches away from each other. There's a half second of silence before Mike rushes to fill it. "Y-you look beautiful," he says.

So much better than pretty, El thinks. She smiles shyly, overwhelmed. She's here, she's actually here, and Mike's here, too, looking so very handsome. And he called her beautiful, with a voice that seems to get deeper all the time, and in a way that sends butterflies fluttering throughout her whole body.

"Do you wanna dance?" he asks, looking out at the crowd of people.

El looks out at them, almost noticing them for the first time. Apprehension crawls up from her toes. "I...don't know how." She's almost scared to say it. That's something a normal girl should know, isn't it?

But Mike's not angry or disappointed or anything that she doesn't. Instead, he smiles. "I don't either. Do you wanna figure it out?"

Relief washes over her and she nods. Mike reaches for her hand – his palm cupping the backs of her fingers, his thumb oh so gently folding over to press against the middle of her palm – and El feels her heart leap into her throat. He leads her onto the dance floor, stopping about a third of the way in. Mike turns to face her and grabs her hands, laying them one at a time on his shoulders. “Yeah, like that,” he says before both his hands land on her hips.

El’s hyperaware of Mike’s hands, his touch burning through the fabric of her dress, and she can’t help but smile as he pulls her a little closer and starts swaying the both of them to the music.

The rest of the world might as well not exist. It’s like there’s only the two of them and the music and nothing else matters. El stares into Mike’s eyes and just can’t escape the emotions that wash over her, doesn’t even want to try. She just feels so much for him, in ways she has no words for, but she knows she would do anything, *anything*, for him. And the way he’s looking at her, the way he looks only at her and can’t look away, his eyes so intense and warm, tells her he might feel the same.

And, yet, she’s still a little surprised when Mike leans in, head tilted at an angle, and kisses her. It’s not that much different from the other kisses they’ve shared, but it’s just enough different that El’s heart races in response. Her lips are just a little bit parted and so are his and the angle their mouths meet at traps her upper lip between his or his lower lip between hers, it doesn’t matter which, and it’s perfect, so perfect...

The kiss is both too much and over too soon. She gasps to catch her breath as her eyes flutter open to look up at him. She wants so many things in this moment: to giggle, to cry, to kiss him again. Instead, she smiles and nuzzles her forehead against his. Her fingers tighten behind his neck as she feels him lean into her. In this moment, she is complete. And she is so very happy.

There are 3 slow dance songs in a row and Mike and El dance

straight through all of them. Mike doesn't know how he got to be so lucky, dancing with the prettiest girl *ever* and knowing she's as happy to be there with him as he is with her. The feel of her in his arms is just *so right* and he's sad when the next song comes up, a fast tempo one, that the moment is over for a little while. If Mike could have it his way, he'd never let her go.

But, he's thirsty, anyway, so it's as good a time as any to take a break. They head over to the punch table and run into the rest of the Party doing the same.

"Well, well, look at Lover Boy, coming to hang out with his friends. Glad you still remember us," Dustin teases.

"Oh, ha ha," Mike says with a roll of his eyes.

Dustin ignores the lame remark. "Hi, El. Having a good time?"

Mike looks over at El, who's looking back at Dustin with the cutest, confused look he's ever seen. "What...?"

"Oh, Dustin did that to his hair on purpose," Lucas says, correctly guessing the source of El's confusion.

"...how?"

The rest of the party, sans Dustin, just lose it at El's, one word remark. "Hey now," Dustin shouts over the fray. "Lay off the hair."

Which means it's now open season on Dustin's crazy hair style. The boys tease, firing one shot after another, and, out of the corner of his eye, Mike sees El sidle up to Max. He's not too sure himself how he feels about the red-headed girl, but he knows how Lucas feels and, for the sake of the Party at the very least, wants the two girls to get along.

Mike sees El stick out her hand to Max. "I'm sorry I was mean," she says.

There's a bit of a pause before Mike hears the sound of Max's hand clapping against El's. He can't see the look on Max's face, but if hands are being shaken, it must not be that bad. "Don't sweat it," Max says.

“Don’t...sweat it?” El repeats.

Max chuckles. “Yeah, it means, um, don’t worry about it, yeah? We’re cool.”

“We’re cool,” El says, not as a question, but as a confirmation of Max’s words, and Mike finds himself sighing in relief.

The 6 of them laugh and joke for a while before splitting up again. Max drags Lucas back out to the dance floor during some crazy song, Will and Dustin go to raid the snack table, and, suddenly, Mike and El are alone again.

Mike looks at her, smiling at the wondrous look on her face. “Did you want to dance again?”

The question causes El’s nose to wrinkle and she shakes her head. “No, too fast. Can we...?” El points in the direction of the bleachers, where it’s a little further from the music. And, Mike notices with a gulp, a little darker.

“Uh, sure,” he says. He takes her hand in his once more and leads them towards the back of the gym. He holds her hand until she’s seated on one of the bleachers before he sits down next to her. Immediately, El presses up against his side and lays her head on his shoulder. Mike presses his cheek against her hair and decides he never wants the night to end.

“Thank you, Mike,” El says after several moments.

“For what?”

El lifts her head to look at him. God, her face is *really* close. It would be so easy to lean over and kiss her again, but he so desperately wants to hear what she has to say. “For asking me,” she replies, all soft smiles and shy glances. “For being my...” she trails off with a sigh, clearly unsure of what words she wants to use.

Mike gets it, he really does. What she means to him defies words and it’s reassuring to see it’s the same for her. “I know,” he says. “Thank you, for coming with me tonight. I’m...*really* happy you’re here, El. I’m really glad we could do this together.” The lame-sounding

admission brings a flush to his cheeks. Could he *be* any more awkward?

But it must have been the right thing to say because now she's leaning in and his eyes slide shut and then she's kissing him. Mike startles a bit when he feels her hand on his cheek, one of her fingers pressed against the curve of his jaw, but she doesn't pull away, so he doesn't either. This is not a simple kiss, no short peck on the lips; this is something more. Mike leans in just a little bit more and breathes her in, a soft breath through his nose. He's instantly assaulted with the sweet smell of her shampoo, the scent of her strawberry lip gloss, and something else that is utterly indescribable, yet undeniably El.

His heart pounds in his chest and he feels hot, *too* hot. Goosebumps break out across his skin and it feels like his heart is going to burst out of his chest if he doesn't do something (what, he doesn't know – touch her, move his lips, just *something*). But before he can decide on what, the kiss ends and El pulls away just enough so he can see her face. There's a dazed smile on her face and Mike finds himself mirroring it. "Wow," he breathes.

El blushes and Mike is mesmerized by the way she glances up at him through her eyelashes. "Good?"

"Amazing," he says with breathless awe and El giggles, burying her face against his shoulder.

Mike wraps his arm around her to keep her close and the two of them spend the rest of the dance there, sitting in the bleachers, El pressed against Mike's side.

The end of the night, of course, comes way too soon.

Outside, El leads the Party to where Hopper (and Mrs. Byers?) are waiting. Her hand is firmly entwined with Mike's and Mike pretends not to see the brow-raised glance Hopper levels at their clasped hands. "Did you have fun, El?" Hopper asks.

El nods excitedly. "I did, so much fun."

The smile on Hopper's face sets off a twinge of sadness inside Mike's

chest and he doesn't know why. *He's such a dad, though.* "Remember, 5 minutes to say goodbye and then we get going."

There are hugs all around as the Party says good night to El, everyone promising they'll see her soon.

Mike goes last and he desperately wishes it was just the two of them so he could kiss her good night. He knows it's greedy, knows he's gotten to kiss her twice tonight, but when it comes to El, he just *wants* in a way that feels endless. "Good night, El. I'll see you later?"

Only, El doesn't seem to have any reluctance to kiss him in front of others. It's not like the last kiss, sweet and long and heavy. It's a quick press of her lips to his, but it feels no less electric than their earlier kiss. "Promise?"

Mike smiles. "Promise." The word has the weight of a thousand meanings and he means each and every one of them.

Then she's gone, bundled up into Hopper's police car, taillights fading from view. Mrs. Byers drives him home and he feels the distance separating him from El like a physical sensation. He hopes it won't be too long until he gets to see her again.

And as he lays in bed, falling asleep, he thinks of her – walking into the gym, dancing with him, kissing him – and falls asleep with a smile.

Notes for the Chapter:

seriously, they're so fluffy, i'm gonna die. how do these chapters get more and more sickeningly sweet every time?

(clearly, i have no control over this whole enterprise)

5. Jan - Mar 1985

Notes for the Chapter:

warning: teenagers with hormones ahead

(definitely still within the T rating, just...they're almost 14 and shit's weird when you're 14)

Jan - Mar 1985

Being able to see her friends, to go outside, to learn so she can go to school, all make time seem to go faster for El and her life is so *full* now. It's been months of so many firsts.

Her first Christmas, where the boys all pool their resources to get her a SuperCom so she can always be part of the conversation.

Her first New Year's party, where she kisses Mike at midnight and drinks sparkling apple juice out of a champagne flute and feels so grown up all the while.

Her first snowball fight with the boys and Max, pulling Mike behind a tree so she can kiss him one second and stuff snow down the back of his jacket the next while he's still dazed, causing him to yelp and chase her, tackling her to the snow while she laughs and squeals.

*(there's a long, heavy pause as they lay in the snow, his weight pressing against her. he looks down at her, the look in his eyes unfathomable, and el feels a million butterflies brushing over her skin, in her stomach. she watches mike's gaze flick down to her lips and knows he wants to kiss her and she wants him to kiss her so bad, to kiss her and never stop and the thought is both scary and exciting, **exhilarating**, because it's mike and because it's her and because it's just the two of them – only there is no "just" when it comes to them and they both know it.*

slowly, mike leans down and el's eyes flutter before closing. she can't catch her breath and she gasps and mike is so close, she can feel the warmth from his breath on her face, on her lips. but before their lips meet, a voice – will's – pierces through both of them, "guys, there's a great hill

for sledding just over here!”

and like that, the moment is broken and the two of them quickly get to their feet, the deep flushes on their cheeks only barely from the cold, which had disappeared while they were wrapped up in each other and comes rushing back in when reality does.)

And, especially, her first Valentine’s day. With Will, she makes homemade cards for everyone – the whole Party, Nancy and Jonathan, *everyone* – even Steve, who watches over her and the rest of the Party sometimes and hangs back with her when the others run off and get rowdy or just get really wrapped up in a campaign. She likes his hair and the affection in his voice when he calls all of them “shitheads” and especially the way he answers her questions and gives her advice so honestly and without treating her like a child.

Steve looks a little shocked when, two days after Valentine’s Day, she hands him the card she made him – “*Steve,*” it says, the whole picture decorated with pink and blue hearts, “*Thank you for being my friend and for watching over everyone. Happy Valentine’s Day. Love, El*” – and El swears she watches him wipe at his eyes, even though her vision is blurred by Steve’s other hand reaching out to ruffle her hair. She gives him a hug anyway.

But her memories of the day are filled with *Mike*. Of giving him the card she worked so hard on and watching him smile so big while he wraps her in tight hug that makes her feel whole and warm. Of him giving her a small wrapped box that holds a charm bracelet with a snowflake charm already on it, blushing as he asks her if she likes it (*she loves it*), his fingers trembling as he puts it on her.

They do a Valentine’s Day celebration with everyone (El knows it’s because of her, because this is her first time celebrating the holiday and it makes her want to cry, how much they care about her) and she spends most of the time practically attached to Mike, her head on his shoulder, his cheek against her hair, and every once in a while, when he’s sure no one’s looking, he presses a soft kiss to the top of her head. His fingers trace through the strands of her hair, which is getting down to her shoulders, making her shiver when he occasionally grazes the back of her neck and she wonders how his touch can affect her so much.

Before the night ends, before Hopper piles her into the car to take her home from the Byers' house, he gives Mike and El a couple minutes to say goodbye.

Hopper closes the front door to the Byers' behind him to say goodbye to everyone else still inside, leaving Mike and El alone on the porch. El smiles at him, glad for the moment alone, even though she's leaving in a bit. "Happy Valentine's Day, Mike. Thank you for the bracelet, I love it."

Mike smiles and lets out a small chuckle. "I'm glad. Happy Valentine's Day, El." He reaches out to tuck her hair behind her left ear, fingertips brushing against the top of her ear and *oh, that feels nice*. El opens her eyes – *when did she close them?* – and sees that Mike has closed the gap between them. She looks up at him and absently wonders how he got so much taller than her when she's barely grown two inches since Hop took her in. But the thought fizzles away when Mike's hand by her ear, instead of pulling away, cups the back of her head, fingers weaving into her hair. El shivers and takes the initiative, rising up on her toes and kissing him before he can kiss her, grabbing onto the front of Mike's jacket for balance.

Mike's lips part in surprise, but he leans in, free hand wrapping around her elbow. It's a long kiss, like the one they shared at the Snow Ball when they sat on the bleachers. Unlike then, Mike pulls away first. Or he would have if El let him. Instead, she chases his mouth with her own and kisses him *again*, not ready for the moment to end. Mike makes a noise in the back of his throat that sends a shiver skittering down El's spine and he kisses her back, a little harder than before. His fingers tighten in her hair and where they're clutching her elbow. El's aware, so aware of how close Mike is, of how the touch of his fingers in her hair and at her elbow sear into her skin, even through the fabric of her jacket.

The kiss slowly comes to an end and, this time, El lets it. She opens her eyes, slowly lowering herself from standing on tiptoe, and looks up at Mike. The way he's looking at her threatens to take her breath away. Mike looks at her like he's seeing her for the first time, all awe and wonderment. Then, a breath later, he smiles and it's such a beautiful smile that El feels her heart do a funny flip. "You're amazing, El," he says, voice quiet and a little rough, like he just woke

up from a nap.

El has no response for half a second and, before she can get one out, the door opens. Mike immediately steps away from her as Hopper walks outside. Mike's hand leaving her hair leaves her bereft and a little cold, but he still keeps his other hand at her elbow. "I'll see you in a couple days," Mike says. *Talk to you later tonight*, goes unsaid. Ever since she got her own SuperCom, there's barely a night when they don't talk before going to bed.

El nods and smiles. "Good night, Mike," she says quietly, stepping aside and wishing she didn't have to.

Mike's wistful sigh tells her he feels the same. "Night, El."

Despite all the teenage drama that now surrounds him on a daily basis (and there is oh so much of it), Jim has to say that his life is going pretty well. Of course, the main source of that "pretty well" is also part of the teenage drama, so, well...*nothing's perfect*.

El is his *daughter*. Sure, she's his adopted daughter and doesn't call him "dad" or anything, but all the same, it's nothing he expected to ever have again. He'll put up with the Teenage Horde with their video games and drama and inane laughter if it means breakfasts peppered with curious questions and evening cuddles while watching basketball on TV and stories before bed.

And it's always changing. El learns so *fast*. She's just a sponge for knowledge and with Nancy Wheeler coming over 3 times a week to tutor and one or more of the boys helping her during the week, it's looking more and more like she'll be ready to join her friends for high school in the fall.

All this is in addition to the dramatic increase in the amount of time he's spending with Joyce Byers. With the Byers' house the only place Jim feels safe letting El be at besides the cabin, he spends a lot of his free time over there. And as the only other adult around, surrounded

by kids, there's no one else to spend time with other than Joyce. Which dregs up a whole file cabinet of history, it seems.

And there's no denying the history. Young Jim had a thing for Joyce back in the day and, at the time, he thought she might have had a thing for him, too. But then Lonnie and then Diane and *Sara* happened and the years stretched out between them. Thing is, though, Jim's pretty sure that thing he had for Joyce never really went away and with all the time he's been spending with her, it's coming back with a vengeance.

Jim's not equipped for this anymore. He's barreling towards 40, suddenly saddled with a telekinetic/telepathic teenage daughter, and it's been he doesn't know how long since the last time he went on anything resembling a date. Plus, there's the fact that Joyce is still grieving over Bob to go along with everything else and, well, let's just say Jim is content to let his thing for Joyce just become part of who he is without doing anything about it.

Especially since he has so many other things to deal with. Like coming up for a cover story for where El came from. And figuring out how to enroll her in Hawkins High come the end of the school year. And buy a damn house. Jesus, he needs a bigger place for him and El, something closer to town so she can get to school, something with a couple of bedrooms and more than one bathroom so the two of them can have their own space. But just the thought of it gives him anxiety.

Money's not the issue. He makes good money being Chief of Police, pretty damn good money, actually. And then there's the hush money ("settlements") the lab paid him *twice*, once for each cover-up in '83 and '84. So Jim's sitting on a pretty good pile of cash just burning a hole in his bank account.

No, the problem is he has no idea where to begin looking. Where the fuck do people move when they move to Hawkins, anyway? And there are so many people he really doesn't want to be neighbors with, not with El and her powers, which are only getting stronger by the day, it seems.

Jim all but despairs of ever finding a place. But, then, one day in

early March on his way to the Byers' house, he spies a "For Sale" sign posted in front of a house not 5 minutes from the Byers'. On the edge of town, nice large lot, a 4-2 according to the sign....

El gives him a strange look as he stops and writes down the number for the real estate agent, but she doesn't say anything, for which Jim is grateful. He doesn't want to get her hopes up and it'll be easier to surprise her with a house after the fact. So he continues driving and begins to plan.

March comes and El's 14th birthday sneaks up on them. It surprises everyone that she's the oldest of the Party, beating Will by a week and Mike by only a few more. And it's her real birthday, too, not one made up to go on a birth certificate.

Nancy only knows this because Mike will. not. stop. *agonizing* over it. Don't get her wrong; Nancy infinitely prefers a lovesick Mike over an angry, moody one, and El is a darling spitfire who's wormed her way into Nancy's heart with quiet sass and infinite charm, but, a girl's got a limit, you know?

So when Mike knocks on her door a Sunday night in early March, opening it not a second later without waiting for a response, Nancy almost groans. "Hey, Nance? Can I talk to you a minute?"

Nancy sets down her physics homework and sighs. "Mike, for the last time, whatever you think El'll like, we can figure out how to get her."

"It's not that, Nancy," he says with his own huffed sigh. "Can I come in?"

There's something about the way Mike asks that has Nancy's curiosity piqued. "Yeah, sure," she says, "Everything ok?"

Mike comes in and shuts the door behind him. "I guess," he says, sitting on the foot of her bed. He folds his legs in front of him like an awkward gazelle and it strikes Nancy just how lanky her brother's

getting. At almost 14, he's already taller than her and shows no signs of stopping any time soon.

There's a long silence and Nancy watches as he picks at the lint on the knees of his jeans, gaze studiously focused on the task. "What is it, Mike?" she asks, breaking the silence. Her tone is gentle and, if there's something she's glad came out of the horrors that have popped up in her life, is how close her and Mike have become that she can be the person he goes to for advice and comfort.

Mike glances up at her and Nancy sees a deep flush creep up behind his freckles. Mike heaves a sigh and moves to get up. "Forget it, it's stupid..."

Nancy's hand shoots out and grabs his shin. "Mike, it's not stupid if it has you so worried about it. I want to help, please?"

Mike settles back down. "You promise you won't make fun of me? Or tell anyone?"

Now Nancy's *super* curious. "You have my word."

Mike glances down and sighs before forging ahead, licking his lips in a nervous gesture. "What's the difference between kissing and making out?"

Nancy blinks. Of all the things she expected her little brother to ask her about, this is one of the last things she ever imagined would be on the list. And, for a moment, she's speechless.

Mike's skin crawls with embarrassment. Nancy's sitting there, staring at him with a kinda dumbstruck look on her face, and he *really* wants the earth to open up and swallow him whole right here and now. But he screwed up the courage to ask the question and, dammit, he's not leaving without an answer.

Because he *needs* an answer. Because he has not been able to stop thinking about kissing El on Valentine's Day, where she kissed him

once and then immediately again without a pause in between. And he kinda, sorta, maybe made out with El (or she made out with him? He's so confused...) and Mike just needs to figure out where the line is and which side of said line this sits on.

He's so fixated on this, he can mostly forget the way he groaned when she kissed him again, his whole body flushing with heat, or the way her hair felt between his fingers as he held her close (*or the way, a couple weeks earlier than that, when he tackled her to the snow and felt her laying beneath him, looking up at him with bright eyes and flushed cheeks. but he can't think about that; he just can't. it's too overwhelming and sets his head spinning in a way that leaves him breathless*).

And the only person he can think to ask is Nancy. The rest of the Party is useless – they're all as hopeless as he is – and Mike's certainly not going to ask his dad. Nope, no way, no how.

So he sits, his question hanging out in the air between him and Nancy, and he waits.

Nancy blinks. Ok. "Um, wow," she says, shaking her head with a small chuckle. "Where's this coming from?"

Mike sighs, heavy with angst. "Ugh, Nancy."

"Hey, you blindsided me with this. A little context is all I'm asking for."

Mike's face screws up with discomfort for a second before he rolls his eyes and slumps his shoulders. "On Valentine's Day, when El and I were saying goodbye, she..." Mike gulps and takes a moment to find his words. "She kissed me and when I pulled away, she immediately kissed me again. And, I just wondered...."

Suddenly, Nancy understands where this is coming from on a couple of levels. One, Mike is obsessing as a way of coping with a whole bunch of other stuff, which, two, happens to be the fact that he's

growing up and hormones are a bitch. She smiles. "So, you're wondering if this means you and El were making out?"

It's amazing how Mike simultaneously blanches and blushes. *One would think they'd cancel each other out.* But, nope, Mike's cheeks flush bright red while the skin on the rest of his face goes bone white. "Yeah," he coughs out, clearly so very uncomfortable; Nancy applauds his courage in even coming to her with this. "Something like that."

Nancy sighs and shakes her head. "Sorry to tell you, little brother, but two kisses right in a row don't count as making out."

The effect on Mike is immediate, like an inner tube suddenly deflating from a puncture. "Oh," he says, slumping even more. There's a long pause and Nancy feels sorry for disappointing him. A thoughtful look passes over his face and he looks back at her. "So, what is the difference, then?"

Oh boy. How does Nancy answer this while still preserving the ability for her and Mike to look each other in the eye? "Making out is like kissing, but more," Nancy says, trying to find her way through to an answer.

The look Mike levels at her is fantastic with its deadpan and, really, she deserves it. "Really, I never could have guessed."

Nancy swats a hand at him. "Oh, give me a break, I'm trying, here." She takes a deep breath. "Making out is...kissing while being really close to the other person, for several minutes. And sometimes, touching the other person above their clothes, though sometimes underneath, too. Sometimes, you'll kiss her neck or her jaw, or she'll do the same to you. It's..." Nancy trails off, thinking of the physicality of her relationships with both Steve and Jonathan. "It's just more."

Nancy looks at Mike, who's staring back at her with wide-eyed wonder. She wonders if the only thing keeping him from being completely grossed out by hearing this from her is the fact that the look on his face clearly is coming from him imagining being with El in the way she just described. "That sounds...uh...yeah..."

Nancy chuckles and figures she needs to impart some sisterly advice to go with the bombshell she just dropped on her brother. “Well, don’t feel like you have to go out and do that all at once,” she says. “Take your time and don’t do anything before you’re ready. And pay attention to what El wants and, more importantly, what she doesn’t want. You have heard of ‘no means no’, haven’t you?”

The speed at which Mike’s emotions swing from moon-eyed to offended is dizzying. “I would never do anything to hurt El!”

Nancy holds up her hands in apology. “I know you wouldn’t. I *know*, Mike.” And she means it. Even knowing how stupid boys get with hormones and girls, she knows Mike would rather lose a limb than do anything to hurt El. “But I know how easy it is to get carried away in the moment. It’s just something to try and keep in mind, ok?”

Mike nods, mollified. “Ok, I get it.” He gets up from her bed. “Thanks, Nancy...I think.”

“You’re welcome...I think,” Nancy replies with a smile.

Mike opens her door and walks through to the hall. Right before he’s about to close the door, he hesitates. “Hey, Nancy?”

“Yeah?”

“This conversation never happened, ok?”

Nancy giggles. “What conversation?”

Mike smiles, bright and happy, suddenly a boy again, but Nancy knows that won’t be true for much longer. “Thanks, Nancy.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry this took a little longer to get out. I got completely and very distracted by outlining the most amazing Modern, School Teacher AU for our two favorite drama queens (i’m talking grade-A rom-com levels of amazing) and I had to write it down before I forgot.

Pace might continue like it's been or a little slower since tomorrow's Thanksgiving & my birthday and the husband unit and I are going to be visiting family for the next couple of days. I'm hoping for a fair bit of downtime in between meals so I can keep writing.

I wanted to thank everyone who's commented or left kudos. It means so much to me to know that people are enjoying this. It's been so long since I've been bitten by the writing bug quite like this and it helps to know that people are reading. So, thank you so much! *hugs*

6. Apr - May 1985

Notes for the Chapter:

So, this chapter exploded, but it doesn't work split into two.

I updated the tags. We delve into El's past a bit, so warning for referenced child abuse.

I'm sorry.

Apr - May 1985

Weeks continue to pass. Winter fades, taking with it the biting cold and early nights. Before anyone knows it, spring's blossoming and it feels like everyone blossoms right along with it, waking up from a long winter's nap.

It's a Tuesday afternoon in the middle of May, only a few days away from Memorial Day and the three-day weekend and Mike is spending time after school with El at the cabin. None of the rest of the Party was available to come out that day for a variety of reasons, so it's just the two of them. Hopper's not off his shift until later, but he checks in by radio every 30 minutes to make sure everything's ok. The check-ins are Mike's idea; he wants Hopper to trust him and so does whatever he can to help that along.

(He doesn't know Jim already trusts him, but plays along and thinks it's sweet, the things Mike's willing to do to prove himself to Jim.)

Ostensibly, Mike is working on a campaign for the upcoming long weekend. He's so excited, they're all going to hang at Will's house and camp out in Castle Byers all weekend (except for Max whose parents won't let her spend the night with a bunch of boys, but she'll be there during the day time) and, sure, they're not going to play D&D the whole time, but it's definitely a feature for the weekend.

Instead of focusing on this fantastic campaign, though, he's completely unable to stop himself from watching El.

El's sitting only a couple of feet away from him on the couch, working on a pre-algebra worksheet Nancy assigned to her. She sits with her legs folded in front of her, looking entirely too pretty than should be possible in a pair of jean shorts and a grey tee shirt, her head bowed as she fills out the worksheet, using a notebook resting in her lap as a table. Every once in a while, she tucks a lock of hair behind her ear, but it always seems to slip free, prompting her to do it again. Her hair is down just past her shoulders now and the weight of it has turned the wild curls it held when it was short into soft, gentle ones.

Mike loves El's hair. He loves the way it smells, he loves how soft it is, he loves how it feels when he runs his fingers through it, he loves how it tickles his neck when she rests her head on his shoulder. He really loves the way El blushes when he tells her how much he likes her hair, the way she giggles shyly and brings her hand up to touch her hair or tuck it behind her ear, and especially the way she sometimes kisses him in response, overjoyed at the compliment.

The minutes pass quickly that afternoon, El studying, Mike torn between working on the campaign and staring at her.

Eventually, El finishes her worksheet with a smile. "There, done!" she exclaims, setting it aside with a flourish.

Mike grins. "How do you think you did?"

"Good, I think." El rests her elbow on her knee and props her chin up in her hand. "Can I ask something?"

Mike's grin turns into a full-blown smile. These are some of his favorite moments with El, her asking him questions and him answering, having conversations about the things she wonders about. Sure, he likes that she's pretty and he loves the feel of kissing her and being next to her and touching her (and he *really* loves those things), but this, watching her be curious and unafraid to discover, that she has the freedom to do so, that she's smart and inquisitive and funny and likes talking with him, that might be his most favorite.

So, Mike sets aside the notebook he's working in and scooches closer to her until he's sitting in the middle of the couch with her folded

knees just touching the outside of his thigh. “Sure, what did you want to know?”

El leans back so her weight’s resting against the arm of the couch and she unfolds her knees, draping her lower legs over Mike’s lap without warning. Unspoken, Mike’s hand comes up and rests on top of one of her shins, thumb rubbing gentle circles on her skin; there’s a thin friendship bracelet wrapped around her ankle that Max made for her when they had a girl’s day and it only highlights how delicate the joint is. “Last week, at Will’s house,” El starts. “I was with Joyce in the kitchen. She said something about ‘Father’s Day’, that I should give Hop a gift. Why? What is Father’s Day?”

“Remember when Will and Jonathan gave Mrs. Byers-” he can’t call her ‘Joyce’ like El does, he just can’t “-flowers and Will made a card? And I bought my mom a picture frame with my picture in it?” El nods. “That was Mother’s Day, when we celebrate our moms. Father’s Day is the same for dads. And, well, Hopper’s your dad now, right?”

“I don’t call him that, though,” El says. “Not yet.”

“And you don’t have to,” Mike rushes to say. He knows she has issues with anything related to the word “papa”. He doesn’t know the details; El’s only spoken about her past a couple of times and, even then, only in vague terms and hints. Mike wonders what El’s life was like before he met her and, at the same time, it scares him to think about. He knows it wasn’t good and it couldn’t have been, not with how scared El was about *everything* when he first met her (*everything except you*, the thought surfaces, *never you*). He wonders if he’ll ever find out; wonders if he’ll be able to handle it if he does.

But, Mike pushes the issue aside and focuses on the present. “But, you care about him, yeah? Like a dad?”

El nods slowly, the look on her face serious and intense; it makes Mike shiver. “I do. Very much.”

“So, if you want, you can get him a gift to show him, give it to him on Father’s Day.” Mike pauses, realizing El’s means are rather limited and rushes to continue. “Or, you can make him something. He’d love whatever you did, I’m sure.”

El's lips scrunch up, like she's thinking about it, feeling it out. "What do you do for your dad?"

That brings Mike up short and it's a bit like someone punched him in the chest. "You know, usual stuff," Mike answers, voice gruff. "Get him a coffee mug or a tie or something stupid like that."

El levels her gaze at him. "*Mike*," she sighs.

Friends don't lie, Mike's brain fills in and there will always be a part of him that hates how easily she sees through him. "It's...complicated, me and my dad."

"My dad and I," El corrects.

Mike can't help but grin. "Nancy been helping with your grammar, huh?" One of El's eyebrows arches up into her forehead. No? Ok.... "It's just...." Mike searches for the right words. "My dad and I don't have the best relationship."

At this, El cocks her head to one side. "Why?"

Mike sighs. "I don't know," he says and means it. "When I was a kid, I wanted to be just like him, always having the right answer and being big and strong. But, now that I'm older, things are so different. And he doesn't get me at all. I don't think he ever understood me and I sure as hell don't understand him and...." Mike lets his head thump against the top of the couch and he looks up at the ceiling. "It's hard to explain."

And it is, it really is. Mike doesn't know where this pervasive sense of disappointment came from whenever he thinks about his dad and when it happened. It's like he woke up one day and, instead of his dad, there was a stranger who sat at the head of the table who Mike could never seem to do anything right for. And he misses when he was younger, when his dad was *his dad*, helping him learn how to tie his shoes, or showing him how to fix the lawnmower. When did that go away? What happened? Was it just part of growing up or something Mike *did*?

Something warm brushes against his chin and Mike let's El guide his

head back down so she can look him straight on, the pad of her thumb pressed right under his lower lip, her fingers grazing his jaw and underside of his chin. "I'm sorry," she says and Mike feels his breath catching in his throat. After all she's been through, she can still feel sympathy, can still care like she does, can still look at him with soft, sad eyes, reflecting his own emotions back at him.

It's too much, just too much. His chest feels too tight, his throat so thick he can't swallow, and his eyes burn like he wants to cry, but can't. Mike moves suddenly, emotion seeking *something*. El gasps and then he's kissing her. His hand finds its way into her hair, strands weaving through his fingers, palm cradling the back of her head. She cups his face with both hands, thumbs brushing against his cheeks, holding onto him gently.

Mike pours everything into kissing El, *everything*. What he feels about his life, the sadness and anger and frustration and the love, sheer love, for the people he cares about, for her, *especially her*.

El's lips relax as the initial kiss draws to an end, but Mike's not ready for the moment to end and he captures her lips again and then again. El leans into him, mouth moving in tandem with his, taking in the emotion he pours into her, keeping it safe. In his chest, Mike's heart bursts in an explosion of butterflies. God, how did he get so lucky?

They trade soft kisses for a couple of minutes before, through some mutual, unspoken agreement, the kisses draw to an end. Mike presses his forehead to El's and just breathes her in, not willing yet to open his eyes. He listens to her breathing, soft and sharp, and realizes his own mirrors it. She's warm where she's pressed against him, her legs still draped over his lap, her hands on his face. She's leaning against the arm of the couch and he's leaning over her, chest pressed against one of her arms, his hand still in her hair, fingers scraping lightly against her scalp, and he revels in the sensation, being so close to her. He just wants to hold on to this moment and live in it forever and never let it go.

Mike loves her. He loves her so much he almost can't take it all in. But he tries, oh, how he tries.

Mike pulls back a little and opens his eyes, finding her staring right

back at him. He smiles and the expression feels a little tremulous. "Thank you," he whispers.

"For what?" She looks at him, happy, but confused, and Mike almost wants to laugh. Can't she see what she does to him, *for* him?

"For being you, for being here. With me."

El smiles and twists in his arms, lithe and graceful, angling herself so she can wrap her arms around him. Her calves press against the outside of one of his thighs to help keep her somewhat upright and balanced. He shifts a little so he's not leaning over her so much, but lets her hug him. Mike buries his face in the crook of her neck and lets his senses be overwhelmed by her; it's almost too easy to get carried away by her. "Where else would I be?" she replies in a gentle whisper, breath tickling his ear.

Nowhere, Mike's thoughts whisper. *Here. Always here. Please.*

When Jonathan knocks on Steve's front door one afternoon in the end of April, Steve almost wants to slam the door in Jonathan's face. Because, really, why is his ex-girlfriend's boyfriend knocking on his door and why would he want to talk to him?

But nothing is that simple and, despite the weird tension, he and Jonathan have enough shared history to allow Steve to be a goddamn grown-up. "What brings you to Casa de Harrington, Byers?" Steve steps away from the door, arm gesturing for Jonathan to come in.

"I'm not interrupting anything, am I?" Jonathan asks as he walks through the front door.

"Nothing important," Steve says. And it's true, he was just sitting on the couch trying to figure out what the fuck to do with his future. You know, just the small things. "What's up? Want something to drink?" Steve leads Jonathan in to the kitchen.

"Um, no thanks." Steve turns to look at Jonathan and finds the other teen giving him a strange look. What? Steve can be hospitable.

“Suit yourself.” Steve leans back against the kitchen island and crosses his arm. “So, what is it?”

“So, you know the big Memorial Day thing the kids are planning?”

Steve is just barely able to keep from rolling his eyes. Because, god does he ever. Ever since little Mike Wheeler (though, he’s not so little, anymore; he can almost look Steve straight in the eye and *holy crap*, that kid’s going to be super ass tall) came up with the idea, it’s almost all they can talk about. Always going back and forth about what movies they’re going to watch and where everyone’s going to sleep and what the story’s going to be for this stupid game they’re going to play. But, and don’t get Steve wrong, he’s somehow come to love the little shits despite all that manic energy. They’re funny and smart and look at him with a hero worship that just gets Steve right in the heart (though he’ll never admit that out loud; he has an image to maintain, after all). Hell, they’re more entertaining than most of the seniors in his class.

Plus, Hopper pays him to watch them sometimes and cash is a language Steve understands so very well.

“Yeah, I know something about it. What of it?” Steve says.

“Well, they’re planning on sleeping out in this fort Will and I built years ago, but it’s totally rundown and, well....”

Steve knows where Jonathan is going with this. *Those little brats better appreciate this....* “What are you thinking?”

And so Jonathan tells him. Steve smiles and just keeps smiling as Jonathan keeps explaining. Those kids are going to fucking flip.

He can’t wait.

It’s Friday, May 24th, 1985, and Dustin races home from school. The Memorial Day Weekend Extravaganza is finally upon them and it’s going to be *epic*. He pedals furiously, the sounds and words of his

friends' excitement echoing in his mind. *I am so ready for the weekend.*
– *Get ready to have your minds blown, guys.* – *Man, this is going to be so awesome!*

Dustin can't keep the dopey smile off his face and he doesn't care. All his friends are going to be at Will's house all weekend, even though Max can't spend the night, but Hopper's letting El stay the *whole time* and, though Dustin's not as excited about that as Mike is (because who could be, really?), he's thrilled that he gets to be with his friend for three whole days and not just hours at a time.

Because, in his own way, Dustin loves El and he's not afraid to admit it. She's nice and funny and laughs at his jokes (well, most of them), and hugs him when she sees him. She's also a superhero, so there's that, too. But there's also something about El that stirs something fierce and protective inside Dustin. El's so strong, but she's been through so much. And he doesn't know the details (*does Mike?*) but it makes him sad that El wasn't able to be a kid and Dustin wants to help make up for that lost time in whatever way he can.

Dustin's so wrapped up in his thoughts that he doesn't notice Steve's car parked in front of his house until he's riding right up to his front door. Dustin drops his bike to the ground and walks over to where Steve is leaning against the passenger door. "What are you doing here?" Dustin says in lieu of a greeting.

"Well, nice to see you too, Dusty," Steve drawls with a wry smirk, extracting a hand from his pocket to whip his sunglasses off his face.

And it's not that Dustin's not happy to see Steve. Somewhere along the way, Steve Harrington became some weirdo combination of big brother and second mother and Dustin loves that he has someone he can go talk to about anything and everything or just someone he can shoot the shit with. But, still, the fuck is going on?

"No, seriously, what's going on?"

Steve shrugs a shoulder, all nonchalant. "I know you got that crazy nerd convention this weekend and, well, I was in the neighborhood, so I thought I could give you a ride. I know you probably got a lot of stuff that you probably don't want to lug over on your bike."

“Uh huh, cute story. What’s *really* going on?”

“What, I can’t do something nice for you?”

Dustin narrows his eyes at Steve and knows he’s not going to weasel anything out of Steve, not when he’s in this kind of mood. “Right. Well, I’m just going to go grab my stuff. You wait here and keep being weird.”

Dustin’s already packed (he was too excited last night and stayed up late packing, wanting to make sure he didn’t forget anything), so all he needs to do is grab his stuff and leave a note for his mom, who’s still at work, before he runs out the house to meet Steve by his car.

Steve’s jaw drops when he sees Dustin walking towards him. “Whoa, are you running away to the circus, or something? Jeez, let me give you a hand before you kill yourself.” Steve helps Dustin wrangle his stuff into the backseat and then they’re off, heading towards Will’s house with “The Heat is On” blaring from the speakers, the windows rolled down, warm air blowing through their hair. Dustin feels *cool* in a way he never thought possible.

They arrive at Will’s house and Dustin’s the first one there, besides Will and El, who are both waiting on the front porch.

El smiles so bright when she sees both Dustin and Steve and she runs over to them. El’s not sure who she wants to hug first, Dustin can tell from the look on her face, but Steve forces the decision and rushes forward to give El a hug, wrapping her in his arms and spinning her around. “Ellie, my little Firestarter!”

“I don’t start fires, Steve!” she says through giggles.

“Yet, kid, *yet*.” Steve puts her down. “Dustin, give the girl a hug and help me get your stuff out of the back seat.”

Dustin smiles so wide he feels like his face might break. “Hi, El!”

“Dustin!” El says before she launches herself at him in a tight hug.

He hugs her back just as tight. “You ready for this awesome weekend?”

“So excited!” El giggles.

Will comes bounding over. “Wait until you see where we’re sleeping!” Will looks happier than Dustin’s seen him in a while and his excitement ratchets up another notch.

“We’re sleeping in Castle Byers, right?”

El grabs his hand. “No, you don’t understand. Come and see!” El pulls him along and Dustin lets her, helping Steve all but forgotten. They head into the wooded area behind Will’s house and Dustin’s jaw drops when he sees what has become of Castle Byers.

Instead of long branches tied together with twine with a sheet for a door, Castle Byers has been turned into a goddamn *cabin*. It’s a little bigger than before, big enough to sleep at least 5 of them. There’s an actual door and a couple of windows and it’s just *luxurious*. “Holy shit,” Dustin breathes.

“Hey, butt munch, thanks for helping,” Dustin hears Steve calling from behind him.

Dustin cringes and turns to see Steve walking towards them, all of Dustin’s stuff piled on his shoulders or in his hands. “Oh, shit, sorry man.” Dustin runs over and takes some of his stuff from Steve. “But, do you see what happened to Castle Byers?”

“Yeah, what do you think? You like it?”

There’s something in the way Steve says it, something in the curve of his smile that sets off the lightbulb in Dustin’s head. “Steve, did you build this?”

“I helped,” Steve says. “Me and the Chief and Jonathan. It was Jonathan’s idea.”

Dustin’s mouth falls open and he drops the stuff he just took from Steve so he can hug him. “Thank you, man! This is so awesome!”

“Alright, alright, let’s not get too sappy here,” Steve complains, but Dustin can tell he doesn’t mean it. “Let’s get your stuff inside.”

The inside is just as awesome as the outside: there are wooden floors and shelves around the top to put lanterns and other stuff. El and Will's stuff is already inside, though not set up. They'll figure out later where everyone is sleeping and Dustin knows Mike's going to want to sleep next to El, so he starts thinking of possible arrangements that keeps the two love birds right next to each other.

Eventually, everyone else arrives and the rest of the Party flips at Castle Byers. "Man, I wish I could spend the night. This is *awesome*. My mom's so lame," Max whines.

With everyone there, the festivities get underway. There's pizza and a Star Wars movie marathon and it's everything Dustin hopes for. Once Max goes home, the rest of them move out to the new and improved Castle Byers. They tell stupid ghost stories by the light of a lantern and eat marshmallows and chocolate since they don't have a fire for s'mores. They go to bed late and, the next morning, the rest of the boys tease Mike and El for waking up snuggled together. Mike blushes, but smiles a bit smugly when El presses a kiss to his cheek and says, "I like waking up next to him." That shuts the rest of them up pretty quick. *Lucky bastard*, Dustin thinks, but doesn't say.

Saturday is the Grand Reveal of the D&D campaign Mike's been working on and the first full outing of Eleanora, Mistress of the Elements, and Maxine the Shadow. With a Mage and a Rogue in tow, the Party sets out to defeat the dread Lich King and free the kingdom's inhabitants of his evil rule. In the end, El and Will combine their powers to enchant Max's daggers with Holy Power and, while the rest of the party distracts the Lich King, Max slips into the shadows, using the Lich King's domain against him, and stabs the dread creature from behind. Everyone cheers when they defeat the bad guy and are hailed as heroes. Again, the only downer is Max heading home, but the rest of the Party gets over it quickly, albeit reluctantly, and settles in for night two.

Lucas, Will, and El are asleep on one end of the cabin, while Mike and Dustin talk in hushed tones about ideas for the next campaign, sitting up with backs resting against wooden walls. Every once in a while, Mike steals a glance at El, who's asleep snuggled next to him and Dustin finds it just adorable the way Mike melts a little.

“...what about a Hydra?” Dustin asks.

“A sea campaign? Could work,” Mike says with a grin.

“Dude, we’ve never had one of those before. We could travel far out to the west and explore new lands, and everything.”

“Maybe we’re stranded on the other side of a teleport gate,” Mike says.

“Or maybe-” Dustin’s cut off by the sound of what can only be described as a panicked whine. And it’s coming from El.

Mike turns towards El, mood changing in an instant from excited to worried. He rests a hand on her shoulder and shakes her gently. “El?”

“No,” she gasps, still asleep, “No, no, no. Stop, Papa, *please stop*.”

Dustin sits up, hackles rising. El’s voice gets higher and more shrill, her breathing coming faster and more scared until she’s hyperventilating.

Mike shakes her harder, panic entering his own voice. “El, wake up,” he says, louder, causing Lucas and Will to wake up.

“What’s going on?” Lucas asks, voice groggy with sleep.

“I think El’s having a nightmare,” Dustin says.

“El, wake up, *please*,” Mike begs.

Tears leak from beneath El’s closed eyelids and she wakes suddenly, a cry on her lips as she bolts up into a sitting position. Her hands cover her mouth and she shakes with uncontrollable trembling.

Dustin hears Mike take in a shaky breath. “El?”

El whips her head around to see Mike and she just *crumbles*. She sobs his name and all but throws herself at him, burying her face in his chest as she clambers into his lap. Mike’s reaction is immediate as he wraps his arms around her and holds her close, his face awash with worry. “Hey, hey, it’s ok,” he says softly. “It was just a nightmare.”

“They wanted me to hurt all of you,” El cries, her thin frame shaking with tears. “But I wouldn’t, I would *never*, and so they made me watch while they hurt you and *I couldn’t stop them*.”

“It wasn’t real, El,” Mike says, his voice hushed. No one can look away from the two of them.

El shakes her head. “No, you don’t understand,” but she doesn’t explain further. Dustin watches as she snuggles into Mike’s embrace, her head angled so she can listen to his heart. One of Mike’s hand finds its way to the back of her head, brushing through her hair with his fingers, while he whispers comforting, soothing words.

Dustin exchanges looks with Will and Lucas, all of them concerned. They want to say something, but don’t know what.

But, before any of them can figure it out, El’s breathing grows silent and her body stills.

“I never saw the sky until I escaped.”

El’s words land like a bomb in the middle of the cabin. Dustin scoots closer to Mike and El and feels like they’re about to tumble over the edge of something big. He spares a glance at Mike and sees that Mike’s face is frozen in almost shock. *Oh no*.

“I’d never been outside the lab before. It was all I knew, where I grew up. Papa and the bad men, they,” El pauses, gulping. “They made me *do* things. They forced me under water so I could find people in the Void, so I could listen to what they were saying. They made me destroy and hurt things and took measurements and did tests, so many tests. When I did what they wanted, when I was *good*, they let me go to my room.” El takes in a deep breath. “But, when I was bad, they locked me in a cell. It was so cold and there was no light and I would hit the door and scream, beg them to let me out, tell them I was sorry for being bad. They would leave me in there for hours.”

Dustin feels tears well in his eyes and he looks over at Mike to see that Mike’s well ahead of him. Silent tears stream down Mike’s cheeks and it breaks Dustin’s heart. Needing to do *something*, Dustin reaches out to grab El’s left hand and he squeezes it. Will and Lucas

have also crept closer, surrounding her, protecting her.

“Then they would let me out and start over again.” El’s breath catches in her throat and the tears start once more, causing her voice to shake. “One day, they wanted me to kill a cat and I tried, but I couldn’t do it. I didn’t want to do it. So Papa told the bad men to punish me. I cried and I begged, but Papa wouldn’t stop them.”

Mike holds on to El so hard, Dustin’s amazed she doesn’t become part of him. Mike shakes his head and his teeth worry at his lower lip, like he’s trying to keep something in. If Dustin has to guess, if he’s feeling a fraction of what Mike’s feeling, it hurts Mike to hear what El is telling him, telling all of them, but he doesn’t want to say anything. El finally has the words to tell her story and no one has the power to stop her.

Dustin gasps as El’s hand shifts in his grip to grab on to him, her fingers wrapped tight around his own.

“I tried to get away.” El’s voice breaks over the words. “But they held on too tight and I couldn’t. They tried to force me into the cell and I....”

Dustin looks down to where El’s holding onto his hand and he sees the numbers tattooed on the inside of her wrist. When he first saw the numbers over a year ago, it didn’t occur to him what it meant and it hits him, in that moment, what she was, what the lab thought she was. An experiment, a piece of *equipment* to be cataloged. *You don’t number people, you number things*. Suddenly, Dustin wants to be sick and the floodgate holding back his tears falls away. He does nothing to stop himself from crying.

“I killed them,” El sobs. “And Papa came over, to see what I did. And he smiled. He *smiled*.”

Everyone’s crying now, breathing hitching with tears. Lucas has his hand on El’s shoulder, Will’s stroking her knee, Dustin lays his other hand on El’s forearm, covering the tattoo, and Mike’s barely holding everything together. His lower lip trembles and his eyes are squeezed shut, but he doesn’t let go of El.

“And then the Demogorgon showed up and killed so many people. I hid. I could have done something, but I hid. I know the Demogorgon hurt Will and killed Barb, but without it, I never would have gotten free.” El’s breathing turns hysterical, nearly a panic attack. “And I’m scared every day that I’ll wake up in the lab and I never want to go back. I can’t, *I can’t*. I would rather-”

El doesn’t get a chance to finish her sentence as Mike pulls El’s head up to his and kisses her, hard and rough and desperate. El whimpers, kissing him back just as hard, like he’s a lifeline in the middle of a sea of misery. No one’s even the slightest bit uncomfortable at the display. “Don’t say that,” Mike says, his voice rough, his forehead pressed against hers, her face cradled in both his hands. “Never say that. You’re safe, now – safe and with us, *with me*, and you’re never going back to the lab. I won’t let that happen.”

“Promise?” El sounds so sad, so lost. The knife lodged in Dustin’s heart twists deeper.

“I promise, I promise,” Mike whispers through his tears.

It’s like the last bit of El’s resolve falls to pieces and she just dissolves. The cabin fills with the sounds of heart-wrenching sobs that tear from her throat. El buries her face back into Mike’s chest as she mourns, grieving for the life she had before, for the years she’ll never get back.

Mike presses soft kisses to the top of El’s head. “I got you, I got you.” And, in this moment, Dustin realizes, in a way he never has before, that this is it for Mike. El is *it* for him, now and forever. The way he holds her, comforts her, tries to take her pain in as his own...he *loves* her. It’s written all across his face, in his voice, on every inch of his body and soul.

And so Mike holds El, comforts her, soothes her, until she falls asleep, exhausted, in Mike’s arms.

Then, it’s just the sound of her soft breathing and everyone else’s sniffing. It feels like minutes passes before anyone speaks.

“It’s not fair,” Mike says in a voice thick with spent emotion.

“No, it’s not,” Will says. And it’s really not, but Dustin can’t find his voice to say so.

“Here, let’s help her lie down,” Lucas says. Mike nods and, together, all four of them help arrange El so she’s lying down. She whimpers and stirs a bit, but immediately calms back down when Mike lays down next to her and pulls her towards him, folding her in his embrace, shushing her with a soft sound and a kiss on the forehead.

Lucas and Will settle back down in their sleeping bags without saying a word. Dustin watches and waits until they’re completely settled before he turns off the lantern and does the same.

As he lays there, surrounded by his friends, he thinks back to before to all the times when he’s wondered what El’s life was like before. Well, now he knows and he can never un-know. He will have to live with it, but, worse, El will continue to carry the weight of her scars every day like she has for the past 14 years. As much as he wishes it, Dustin can’t change the past – not for El, not for anyone – but he’ll damn well make sure El’s future is the best it can be. It’s the least he owes her.

Notes for the Chapter:

It occurred to me that the boys have no idea what happened to El in that lab and, as of the ending of season 2, she might not be able to explain what happened.

I think she deserves to tell her story and the boys need to know so they can be there for her. Dustin was the best conduit for this; if Mike’s the heart of the group, Dustin’s the soul.

7. May - Jun 1985

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry for the delay on this chapter. I have the plague (i.e. a cold), so it's also a little short. hope it turned out ok!

May - Jun 1985

It's been over a week now and Jim's still no closer to figuring out what the hell is going on with El than he was when she came home after the Memorial Day weekend sleepover.

She sits across from him at the dinner table, the setting sun casting shadows through the nearby window. He's been working with Joyce the best they both can at his ability to provide meals with better nutrition, so him and El are quietly eating meatloaf with mashed potatoes and broccoli and it's a testament to El's mood that she doesn't complain about the vegetable. *At all.*

What is going on with her? It's not something Mike did, that Jim's sure of. One, that's almost *hilarious*, the thought of Mike doing something to make El sad. And, two, there'd be a lot more crying and angst and general drama if that *were* the case. No, it's like she went away for the weekend a mostly happy child and came back with a grey cloud hanging over her head. It's like she's sad about something and is just resigned to living with this feeling for the rest of her life.

Jim's worried. And not just because he cares about El and worries about her well-being. No, he's worried because, somehow, he's afraid El knows what Jim hasn't told her and is disappointed in him for keeping it a secret, because *friends don't lie*.

But, if El does know what Jim's keeping from her, why isn't she happier?

Because Jim bought a house.

Two months ago.

And has been spending every spare moment getting it ready for them to move into. He's even started telling people at the station the beginning of the cover story for why he suddenly has a teenage daughter (*a second cousin and his wife passed away, leaving Jim as next of kin. her parents raised her in a commune, which explains why she's never been to school before. it's not the best story, but it's all he could think of. already, the story is spreading across hawkins, damn small towns*).

Jim had planned on telling El when she got home after the three day weekend, but he noted her mood when he picked her up from Joyce's and decided he'd just tell her the next day.

But it's been 9 days of *I'll tell her tomorrow* and Jim's at the end of his rope waiting for the mood to break. He hasn't asked because he's trying to respect El's privacy, but there's only so much he can take.

So, Jim sets down his fork and takes a long sip of his beer. "So, you wanna tell me what's going on?"

El glances at him through her eyelashes, but barely raises her head. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, you came back from that sleepover at Joyce's like you were carrying the weight of the world on your tiny shoulders. I just want to make sure everything's ok." He pauses. "Everything is ok, isn't it?"

El bites her lip and pushes a piece of meatloaf around her plate, swirling it into her remaining potatoes. She huffs a sigh. "I don't know."

"You can tell me anything, you know that, right?"

El nods and there's a long silence that follows until she puts her fork down and looks up at him. "I told my friends about what happened to me in the lab," she says suddenly. "It made them cry, even though they say they're happy I told them. I don't know if I did the right thing. And I feel guilty because I haven't told you, yet."

Oh boy, that's a lot to unpack. Jim decides to focus on the end and work his way to the beginning. "El, honey," he says, the endearment

slipping out naturally. "Do you want to tell me what you told them?"

The question makes El's lower lip wobble. "No," she whispers.

"And that's ok," Jim says, reaching out to cover her hand with one of his own. "I only want you to tell me if you want to tell me." And, really, he knows more than she thinks. He saw the lab, saw where she slept, and heard some of the things Dr. Owens said about the lab's work and purpose, so Jim has a pretty good idea about what it was like for El in that place. "I'm glad you felt like you could tell someone, though."

A couple of tears trail down El's cheeks. "But it hurt them."

"Because it hurt you," Jim says. "Have you and Nancy talked about empathy?"

El shakes her head and wipes away the tears from her face. "No. What is it?"

"Empathy is where you feel what someone is feeling because you care about them. Your friends were crying because someone hurt you, so it hurt them, too." And, really, Jim's so glad those kids are El's friends and that they care so much about her. It makes him sleep easier at night knowing she has a small army of protectors led by her boyfriend.

"Then why did Mike say he's happy I told them?"

Jim smiles. "A couple of reasons, probably. One, because if they know, they can help you better when you're sad or when something is wrong. And, two, because you trusted them enough to tell them something you've never told anyone before, yeah? I'm sure they wish what happened to you never happened, which is why they're sad, but that you felt like you could tell them is a good thing, and that's why they're glad."

Even though El's pouting, she wrinkles her nose in exasperation. "People are weird."

Jim chuckles a bit. "You're telling me, kid," he says, a wave of relief washing over him. And it hits him. This is the moment. He grins.

“Say, if you’re finished with your dinner, wanna go on a field trip?”

Jim knows the kids have told El about field trips and she perks up at the question. Her eyes are shining not just from the earlier tears and there’s an excited grin on her face. “A field trip? Can I see if Mike wants to come?”

Jim laughs. “Maybe later. Let’s just have this first go ‘round be you and me, yeah? I promise you can tell him about it later.”

El narrows her eyes at him suspiciously, but her excitement is too great to be contained. “Ok, I will,” she says. She starts to get up, but remembers her manners in time. “May I be excused?”

God, he’s so proud of how far she’s come. “You may.” El rushes from the table, hastily placing her plate in the sink, and all but runs into her room to put on shoes.

A few minutes later, they’re in Jim’s cruiser heading to the house. Jim’s palms are sweating where they grip the wheel and he’s hoping, *praying*, she likes it.

As it is, the looks she’s giving him are giving him small heart attacks. “Hop, this is the way to Will’s house.” El’s tone is accusatory and Jim cringes.

“I promise you, we aren’t going to Will’s house,” Jim says.

“Where are we going, then?”

Jim smiles. “You’ll see.” El heaves a dramatic sigh like the 14-year old girl she is. It makes Jim so happy.

Then, finally, Jim’s pulling up in front of their new house (*holy shit, he bought a house*). He parks in the driveway and looks over at El with a waggle of his eyebrows as he kills the engine. The look of confusion that’s spread over El’s face is just so adorable.

“Come on, out of the car,” Jim says. He gets out of the car and hears El do the same. He reaches into his pocket for his new set of keys.

“What are we doing here?” El asks as she follows him towards the

front door.

Jim unlocks the front door and pushes it open. He turns around and smiles at her. "Checking out our new house."

So many things happen to El's face, all at the same time: her mouth falls open, her eyes widen, her eyebrows climb high onto her forehead. "This is...our house?" El's voice is so small, Jim has to strain to hear her.

"It sure is. Wanna come take a look?"

El's quiet as Jim leads her inside, shock rendering her mute. The house is nothing special. A two-story, farmhouse style home, it has a small porch out front and is fairly open inside, with the kitchen, dining room, and family room blending into one another without walls to separate them. The house is fully furnished, thanks to the many long hours of furniture shopping he's put in.

Stairs lead up to the bedrooms and, after showing her his room and the bathrooms, Jim finally guides her to where she'll be staying. "...and this is your room," he says, stepping aside so El can take it all in.

It's a beautiful room and Jim's so grateful for Joyce and Nancy's help when it came to picking out colors and furniture. The walls are painted a pale green and there's a double bed with a white, wooden headboard and a pale purple comforter spread across it. Nearby is a matching dresser, and on the other wall is a desk and a vanity. A large window faces the backyard and there's a closet just inside the door. There're no decorations (which Nancy insisted was fine, assuring him El would want to do that herself), but otherwise, it's a perfect room for a teenage girl.

El turns around in the room, trying to see everything at the same time. "This is mine?" She turns to look at Jim, who's still standing in the doorway.

"Sure is, kid. What do you think?"

Jim melts as tears well in El's eyes, despite the smile on her face, and she launches herself at him, wrapping her arms around him as she

buries her face in his chest. “Thank you, I love it! Thank you, thank you, thank you...”

Jim hugs her back, holding her close, and feels like his heart might burst from the overflow of emotion. “I’m glad, kid.”

A few moments later, El pulls away and wipes away the tears as she giggles. “When do we move?”

“I’m thinking next weekend,” Jim says and hurries to explain. “I told the guys at the station that I was going next weekend to pick you up from where you lived before.”

El cocks her head at him with confusion. “You told people about me?”

“Yeah, well, traditionally, people know when you have a daughter.”

El blushes, but smiles. “I am your daughter, aren’t I?” It’s not so much a question as an affirmation, like she’s really starting to understand what that means, like it’s hitting home.

Jim can’t help himself and pulls El back to him in a fierce hug, pressing a kiss to the crown of her hair. “You are, El.”

Excitement spreads through El, all jittery and restless. She and Hop are going to be moving into a house. And she has *her own room*! Or, she will once they move.

It’s not like she doesn’t have her own room, now, in the cabin. But Hopper sleeps out in the main room and they share a tiny bathroom and, with the new house, she’ll have her own room *and* bathroom, and Hop’ll have his own room, too.

And her new room is so pretty, she wants to giggle with happiness as she thinks about it as Hop takes them back to the cabin from the new house. She can’t wait to tell Mike!

But, once back at the cabin, El gets caught up in planning on where her, admittedly, meager belongings are going to go and making lists of the things she wants to figure out how to get. It's only when she looks at the clock (*ten-fifteen*, a corner of her mind recites precisely), that she realizes she is horrible, *terribly* late for her nightly 9:30 call with Mike.

"Oh no!" she gasps. All thoughts of the details of her new room fall away and, with a heart beating heavy in her throat, El rushes to grab the SuperCom from where it's stashed under her pillow. With a quick flick of her thumb, she turns it on and tunes it to the channel she and Mike talk on every night, using her powers to boost the signal like always.

"Mike, are you there?" Nothing. A few heartbeats of silence. "Mike?"

Over at the Wheeler household, Mike is half-asleep, SuperCom resting on his chest as he lays in bed and dozes. School's been kicking his butt as they approach end of year exams and he's exhausted with trying to pull his GPA up as much as possible after the lackluster grades he got in the fall semester.

These nightly calls with El have been his reward for his daily efforts and normally, she responds after only a couple of seconds. But, tonight, there was no response. Mike tried to tamp down his panic. *I'll give her a few minutes*, he thought to himself as he lay back in bed, *She's safe, no need to worry*. But the school week caught up to him. He dozed off part way through his vigil and now he's all but asleep.

The sound of El's voice – clear, a little breathless, and beautiful – pierces through the cloud of sleep and Mike starts as he's pulled back to the land of the waking. He gasps with the sudden lurch back to full consciousness and fumbles a bit for the SuperCom, even though it's lying on his chest. "El? Hi, everything ok? It's late."

El pouts even though the way Mike's voice sounds is her favorite – low and raspy. “I'm sorry,” she rushes out. “I lost track of time.” It's a newer figure of speech for her, but El likes it.

“That's ok,” Mike says and El can feel the relief in his voice like a physical touch. “I was just a little worried.”

It's been different, the feel of the conversations her and Mike have been having the past couple of weeks, since El revealed to him and the others what her life was like in the lab. She's never felt closer to anyone in her entire life and she hopes it's the same for him. “I didn't mean to worry you,” El says, almost at a loss for words.

“I'm fine, now,” Mike says. “Did something happen over at the cabin?”

The reason for El's late call circles back into her thoughts and El smiles. “Hop and I are moving!”

El's words take a moment to work their way through Mike's brain. Moving? “Wait, what?”

“Yes, near Will's house, but closer to town!”

Despite his confusion, Mike finds himself grinning at the sheer excitement in El's voice. “Hopper bought you guys a house?”

“He did. And I get a new room and everything. Mike, it's so pretty, I love it. I can't wait to move!”

“That's great, El,” Mike says. “You'll live closer to the rest of us.” *And to me*, he thinks, but doesn't say.

El does it for him, though, so that's ok. “And to you,” she says.

Mike's heart does a funny beat-skipping flip in his chest. “Yes, and to me,” he says. “So, um, when do you guys move?”

“Hop said next weekend,” El says. “He says that’s when he told the others at the station that he was picking me up.”

That throws Mike a little. “He’s telling people about you?” Guess Hop feels it’s safe, now, or something.

“Traditionally, people know when you have a daughter,” El mimics, playfully deepening her voice. “That’s what he told me when I asked about that.”

Mike chuckles at the mimicry. “You do a good impression of the Chief, El.”

Mike hears El huff a sigh. “I live with him, so I should be able to.”

That makes Mike laugh out loud. “True, true.”

“So, how was school?” El asks as she does every day.

Mike settles with a sigh as their nightly routine gets underway, though the undercurrent of excitement and happiness at El’s news still runs through him. “It was good, I guess. We have a bunch of tests next week before graduation. I can’t wait until summer vacation.” Really, he can’t. He’s going to spend every day with El and his friends and it’s going to be glorious. He just has to get through the next week and a half, first.

Eventually, Mike and El run out of things to talk about and Mike feels the conversation begin to draw to a close. “I should go to sleep,” Mike says. He’s aware of the slight whine in his voice. He just wishes she was here with him. It only took three nights of sleeping next to her, of falling asleep with her snuggled against him, of waking up holding on to her, to fully acclimate and suddenly, he can’t remember anything *but* having her near at night and the absence of her cuts into him.

“Ok,” El sighs. “You need to make sure you get rest for school.”

Mike nods, though he knows El can’t see it. (*or can she?*) “Are you gonna be at Will’s house tomorrow?”

“Yes, for dinner,” El says. “Maybe, we can take a walk so I can show

you my new house.”

Mike smiles. “I can’t wait. ‘Night, El. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Good night, Mike.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Holy shit, Jim bought a house.

Coming up, summer vacation and, maybe, El's first day at school!

8. Jun - Jul 1985

Notes for the Chapter:

warning: teenagers with hormones ahead + some necking. nothing too crazy, just 14 year olds being 14 year olds

Jun - Jul 1985

School lets out for the summer and Jim and El move into their new house. It doesn't take long; neither of them have that many belongings, when it comes down to it. The house looks a little bare bones once all their stuff is moved in, but Jim knows how these things go; it'll only be a matter of time before it's full of life and clutter.

The one area Jim allows himself to splurge on is letting El pick out things for her new room. They head into the city for one of the malls, the sun shining high in the sky.

As the skyline approaches fast on the highway, Jim spares a glance over at El. She's bopping along with the opening strains of "Fortunate Son" on the radio, the breeze from window, open just an inch, blowing through her hair. Jim chuckles. "You like this song?"

"I like the beat," El replies, looking over at him with a smile. It's strange, a little, in a good way, that their music tastes run so similar. Jim knows her friends have exposed her to whatever music is hip these days, so she's not just latching on to what she's heard from him because it's the only thing she's heard.

But it's interesting that she enjoys a song that harkens back to a much different time in Jim's life, to a time lounging with his squad mates, stationed in god-forsaken, sweltering hellholes, this song blaring through the jerry-rigged radio as a metaphorical middle finger to their CO while they smoked cheap commissary cigs and told tall tales about the girls waiting back home for them.

"It's a good beat," Jim agrees, feeling the distance between the years

both shrink and expand at the same time.

A comfortable silence stretches over them once more and Jim relaxes. He knows El's a teenage girl and has a tendency to go a mile a minute when she's excited about something, but Jim also likes how much El is content to just be in the moment, that she's comfortable enough with herself to not need to fill silences out of awkwardness.

Eventually, Jim pulls off the freeway and enters the suburbs of Indianapolis. "Now, I hope this doesn't disappoint you after your Chicago adventure."

Jim feels more than sees the withering look El's giving him. Now that his initial panic has long since faded after El told him about her trip into Chicago, he brings it up every now and then in a teasing manner. Mostly because she gives him that look. She has no snappy retort this time, though, and just heaves a sigh as she slumps against the seat.

But the teenage angst fades as they head into the mall, El's eyes wide with overwhelming wonder. Jim steers her from store to store, gathering small trinkets and posters and a couple of stuffed animals. He knows, as the number of bags he's carrying grows, that this is extravagant, that some might think he is spoiling her. But El went 13 years without being spoiled for anything and Jim figures she's earned the chance to catch up a little.

On their way out, Jim nudges El away from Macy's and the rows of mannequins dressed in just the right way to catch the eye of a 14 year old girl. "Next time, kid," Jim says. "We'll see if Joyce or Nancy can take the time to take you clothes shopping."

El lets herself be guided away with a wistful sigh and Jim makes a mental note to talk to Joyce or Nancy sooner rather than later.

Once they're back at home (*that'll take a bit of getting used to*), Jim checks in on El as she sits in her room, her haul spread out over her bed. There's an intense, contemplative look on her face and it's clear that something is amiss. "Can't figure out where everything goes?"

El nods. "Also," she says, "Not enough pictures."

Jim eyes the stack of posters doubtfully. She has enough there to practically plaster the damn wall. What does she mean, not enough pictures?

There must be something on his face that gives away his thoughts, because El explains. “At Mike’s house, in his room and Nancy’s room, there are pictures. Photographs. Of friends and family.”

Jim nods, understanding now. “All this stuff’s lacking the personal touch, huh?” El nods and sighs. An idea comes to Jim’s mind a moment later. “Well, why don’t you call up Will? Jonathan’s always taking all those pictures when you guys are all over. Maybe he has some he doesn’t mind letting you keep.”

El looks up at Jim with wide, hopeful eyes. “You think?”

“Won’t know unless you ask. C’mon, let’s go get them on the phone.”

It’s just after dinner and Will’s in his room, lounging on his bed. His hands hold an open copy of “Ender’s Game”. It’s Dustin’s copy that he lent to Will and Will *cannot* put it down. He reads about Ender and his amazing abilities and the horrible buggers, the insect aliens who are attempting to invade Earth. Dustin had promised it was fantastic and Will can’t help but agree. He has maybe 50 pages left and Will both wants to race through them and is dreading finishing since that’ll mean no more book.

Outside the room, the phone rings, but Will barely notices. His mom calls his name, and, again, Will barely notices. It’s only when his door flies open and Jonathan stands in the doorway, loudly calling his name, that Will looks up from the book. “Hey, didn’t you hear Mom calling? Phone’s for you.”

“Sorry,” Will says with a cringe. He takes a bookmark from his nightstand and places it between the pages so he doesn’t lose his spot. “I got caught up with reading.”

Jonathan chuckles as Will all but launches himself up from the bed. "I could see that," Jonathan says. When Will reaches the door, Jonathan extends a hand to ruffle his hair. Will dodges most of it, but Jonathan's hand musses the hair on the crown of his head and Will laughs as he ducks under Jonathan's arm (it's not as easy to duck, though; Jonathan's mostly done growing, but Will's starting to catch up. Will hopes he'll be at least as tall as his brother, one day).

"It's a really good book," Will says as he and Jonathan walk down the hall towards the phone. "I think you'd like it." Jonathan just laughs and Will picks up the phone that rests on top of the cradle. "Hello?"

"Hi, Will."

A big grin splits Will's face. "El, hi!"

"I hope I wasn't interrupting."

There's a precise tone to El's voice and Will knows it's the manners Hop drills into her. El tries so hard to be considerate, it's adorable. "No, you weren't. What's up?"

"I wanted to ask a favor. Is that ok?"

Will's heart does a strange kick in his chest. "Of course, anything." He means it, too. She saved him and saved his friends. She's nice and doesn't look at him like he's going to break any second and she gets it, she *gets it*: the loneliness, feeling different, surviving every day. "What do you need?"

So, that's how Will ends up walking over to the new Hopper household at 10 o'clock the next morning, backpack strapped securely around his shoulders. In it are his art supplies and a box of photos that Jonathan let him take, ones that fit El's description.

It takes 15 minutes to convince his mom to let him walk over by himself to meet up with El, but she eventually concedes when Will points out it is just down the street and he'll call the second he gets over there. Will's glad she let him. He's tired of being watched over all the time and the moment alone, truly alone where he's the master of his own destiny even if it's for 10 minutes, is more precious than

gold.

But, all too soon, Will finds himself heading up the paved walkway to the Hoppers' front door. There's a pang of envy, deep in his chest, at how nice the home is compared to his own. It's not an unfamiliar feeling, not by a long shot. But Will hates it, hates that he can't stop it, hates that there's a part of him that wants more even though he knows how hard his mom works and that she loves him and that's what matters, right? That he has a mom and a brother who love him and a roof over his head?

Besides, it's not like everyone else's life is perfect – Mike's parents seem to become more and more like strangers to each other every day; Dustin's dad just up and left without warning last summer; and Lucas' perfect family is a hard-won struggle to prove themselves (Will's seen and heard the way people treat Lucas just because of his skin color and knows that the Sinclair family tries hard to *fit in* because one wrong move will ruin everything. Yeah, sure, the Byers family has a reputation as fuck-ups, but they're *white* and that makes all the difference).

But it's so hard when everyone has new clothes and Will's stuck with hand-me-downs. Or when the Party has to spot him the money for the arcade because his mom couldn't spare two dollars in quarters.

Will pushes the sickening thoughts aside as he approaches the front door and rings the doorbell. A few moments later, Will hears the sound of footsteps rushing towards the front door and then it swings open, revealing a smiling El. "Will, you're here!" She immediately throws her arms around him in a tight hug and Will hugs her back. He loves getting hugs from El. She hugs him because she likes him and is excited to see him, not because she's checking to make sure he's ok, and her excitement is contagious.

"Hi, El!" The hug ends and they untangle themselves. "I brought the pictures. Plus, some art supplies if you want to draw stuff to put in your room."

"Ooh, that's a great idea. Come on, let's go inside." El steps aside to let Will enter first and then she shuts the door behind them. "Do you want something to eat? Or drink?" She's in hostess mode and Will

smiles at how adorable she is.

“Maybe later. I ate breakfast not long ago, but we’ll eventually get hungry for lunch, right?”

“Right,” El says. “Let’s go upstairs.”

“Let me call my mom first. I told her I would when I got here.” El waits by Will as he makes the call and, when it’s over, she leads the way upstairs, Will following close behind.

“Hopper home today?” he asks as they reach the top floor.

El shakes her head. “No, he’s at work until 6. It’s just me here, today.”

“Oh, maybe we can hang out with the others if we finish before then,” Will says. It’s summer vacation and all 6 members of the party have made a pact to spend every day together. And you don’t break a pact.

El hums with contentment at the idea and leads Will into her room. He likes El’s room; it’s bright and airy and so comfy looking. El plops herself down on the bed and Will follows suit, swinging his backpack off his shoulders so it lands in between them. He spies a mountain of posters and trinkets on the vanity by the window and smiles. “Did Hop get you those?”

“I picked them out when he took me to the mall in the city,” El says, still excited at the day trip, that she was allowed to go outside with people.

“Sounds like fun. I’ve only been a couple of times,” Will says as he unzips his backpack. “Alright, let’s see what we got here.” He pulls out the box of photos and sets the half-full backpack on the ground. “Jonathan pretty much let me take what I wanted, so I grabbed a whole bunch, mainly of the Party.”

The box is made of black cardboard and stuffed to the brim with photos Jonathan’s taken over the past year. Will lifts the lid and the two teens peer inside. “Here, let’s each grab a pile and start sorting them. We’ll place ones we like over here-” Will indicates the space to

his left. “-and the ones we don’t like so much over here.”

They start sorting and it only takes a few handfuls worth to spark Will’s curiosity. “So, what do you want to do with these, anyway?”

Will watches as El gives him a shy look, her head bowed, her gaze meeting his through her eyelashes. “At Mike’s house, in Nancy’s room, she has a...board? Of some kind with lots of photos on it. And there are picture frames all over, too. I want something like that for my room, too. Plus....” El trails off, a shadow falling across her face.

Concern seeps into Will’s skin. “What?” he asks, prompting her to speak. He knows she’s a superhero, what with her powers and all, but there’s something so quietly tragic about her that Will can relate to, something that causes a surge of protectiveness to well up inside of him.

“It makes it real.” Her gaze falls on a photo on top of the keep pile and Will follows suit. It’s a photo from last Christmas vacation, the whole Party sitting at Will’s house near the tree, laughing about something. They’re all sitting on the floor, cups of cocoa nearby with Monopoly set up between them. It’s a moment El could have never imagined growing up, Will’s sure, and the sadness of the thought hits him. He understands.

“Means you’re not back in the lab, huh? That you’re really out.”

El nods. “Really, really out.”

“Well, then,” Will says, “We need to make a really awesome collage of pictures. So you always know it’s real.”

At that, El’s head cocks to one side in the way it usually does when one of them says something she doesn’t understand. “Collage?”

“It’s when you take a bunch of pictures and stuff and arrange them to look really cool. I’ll show you.”

El smiles and it warms Will all the way through. “Ok.” And, so they continue to sort, making comments about pictures that they find along the way.

Will pauses when he comes across a picture that just hits him in the chest with how pretty it is. It's from Will's birthday party, back in March. Will's not in this picture, though; it's just Mike and El, sitting on the couch in the Byers' living room. Neither of them are looking at the camera; Mike's looking off to the side, one hand gesturing at whoever he's talking to through the laughter clearly painted on his face. The other hand is resting on El's knee, which is drawn up with the other as she leans against him, her cheek pressed against his shoulder, her hand wrapped around the inside of his elbow. She's also not looking at the camera; she's looking in the direction that Mike's looking in, a quiet smile on her face not quite reaching the same level of excitement as on Mike's. But the expression on both of their faces are so serene, so peaceful, that it's beautiful.

Will flips to the next photo and realizes it's from moments after the previous one. Mike and El, still on the couch at his birthday party, his hand still on her knee, her still leaning against him, but this time, they're looking at each other. His smile is softer than the previous picture, hers is brighter, and it's like they're the only two people in the world when they look at each other. There's a sense of age, of maturity, in the way Mike and El look at each other, like they are two old souls who were just waiting to find the other. It makes Will shiver at the intimacy in the photo and he knows it's only one of thousands of photos like this that'll be taken of the two of them together in their lifetimes.

"You love him, don't you?" The words fall out between Will's lips before he's even aware that he thought them.

El looks at him with confusion. "Hm?"

Will shows her the picture of Mike and El looking at each other. "Mike, you love him."

A pretty flush climbs up El's cheeks and Will itches to capture that color onto something. "I do, I think." She pauses. "How do you know, when you love someone?"

Oh boy. Will does not feel at all qualified to answer this question, mostly because he has so little experience of his own in the matters of love and relationships. But he reads books and sees movies and

watches others around him, so he's been able to piece together some sort of understanding. "I think..." he starts and pauses a little to find the right words. "I think it's a lot of things. Like, you like looking at the other person and talking to them every day. That you would do anything for them, even if it hurts you. That you're happiest when it's the two of you doing nothing in particular. Or the way your heart speeds up when you hold hands or kiss." Will breaks off, feeling a little bashful. "I dunno, lots of things. It's hard to describe."

But, given the soft look on El's face, she seems to have understood what he meant. "Is there someone you love like that? It's just...you know a lot about it."

Will smiles, but it's not exactly a happy one. "No, not yet." And he doesn't know if there'll ever be someone. Will tries to imagine what shape that person would take – strong arms, soft hands, tall enough to fold him in a tight embrace, pretty eyes with long lashes, voice low and rumbling like distant thunder. Will's only ever told one person – Jonathan – that he prefers boys over girls, but he thinks El would understand, that she would smile and encourage him and be happy that he knows what he wants.

(a year later, not that will knows this now, el will be the second person he comes out to. and she'll smile and give him a hug and tell him he'll find his special guy someday. it'll become a mission for her, to find someone for him. matchmaking on overdrive. and, someday, many years from now, when he brings home his special someone, el will be the first person to welcome him warmly to their weird family.)

El reaches over and places a warm hand on Will's forearm. "You will, someday."

Hope swells in Will's heart. God, he wants what Mike and El have. He wants it so bad it dwarfs all his other wants. "Promise?"

"Promise."

June fades into July, the height of summer. The sun is setting, creating a cascade of colors across the sky. Any other night, El would be enthralled with the colors, marveling at their beauty.

But, this night, El barely notices the sky. She and Mike are sitting length-wise on the porch swing at the Byers house, her leaning against him as she sits in the cradle of his legs. Mike has one foot on the ground and is using it to gently push the swing back and forth. They can hear the sounds of the rest of the Party playing on Will's Atari coming from inside the house and, normally Mike and El would be there with them. But it's been so long since they've had a moment alone that when Mike grabbed El's hand and nodded in the direction of the porch, El went gladly.

"Do you think they've noticed we're not in there?" Mike asks and El shivers at how close his voice is to her ear.

"Probably not," El says. She leans her head back so that it's pressed against Mike's collarbone, the side of her head brushing along the line of his jaw. "Too busy competing with each other."

Mike chuckles and the arms wrapped around El's waist tighten. "You're probably right." Mike's warm from where El's pressed against him and, even though it's not cold outside, the air feels chilly by comparison. El drapes her arms over Mike's and her fingers draw mindless patterns against the tops of his hands and forearms. She loves touching him, loves the feel of his skin beneath her fingertips, loves the way goosebumps sometimes breakout at her touch.

"Hey, I wanted to ask you something," Mike says a few minutes later.

"Yeah, what?"

"My parents are having a 4th of July party in a few days and my mom said I could invite my friends." El knows about the 4th of July from her tutoring sessions with Nancy, so she doesn't need to ask for clarification. "Do you think you'd be able to come? You can bring Hopper, if you like. Apparently, there's a bunch of rumors going around about you now that you're 'officially here' in Hawkins, so I'm sure my mom would let you come to the party if I told her you and Hopper would be there, if only because she's curious." Mike pauses

and takes in a deep breath. “And then I could introduce you to my parents.”

El smiles. “You want to introduce me to your parents?” She’s watched enough movies and daytime TV to know what *that* means.

El can practically feel the way Mike’s blushing from the way he stammers. “I-I mean, not as my girlfriend, or anything. Unless you wanted me to. Really, it’s up to you, I just-”

“*Mike*,” El says, cutting him off before he gets completely overworked. She looks up and Mike pulls his head back a bit so their gazes can meet. “It’s fine. I’ll ask Hop if we can go. I want to meet your parents.”

“Ok, great!” Mike says and El lowers her head back down. “Maybe, I won’t introduce you as my girlfriend, yet. I mean, as far as my mom knows, we’ve only known each other a few weeks, right? That’d be weird.”

El giggles as a realization hits her. “Does that make you my boyfriend?”

There’s a heavy moment before Mike responds. “Um, I mean, if you wanted?” El has a feeling that sentence shouldn’t have ended like a question. “I know we haven’t talked about it, but – I just kinda figured-”

“Then you’re my boyfriend, Michael Wheeler,” El says matter-of-factly. Really, it’s been a settled issue for her for quite a while now. In fact, she doesn’t know why they haven’t talked about this sooner, now that she’s thinking about it.

“Oh, good,” Mike says, voice cracking a little. He clears his voice and tries again. “Good, that’s good.”

“You’re such a goober,” El says with a giggle, using one of Max’s favorite teases.

“Probably true,” Mike says and El feels him shift to press a kiss to the side of her head.

Only, El had been lifting her head to look up at him and, instead of kissing her hair, Mike's lips brush against the corner of her jaw, right under her right earlobe.

The effect is immediate. El gasps, electricity humming through her veins originating from the spot where Mike kissed her. She grips his arms, still wrapped around her, and finds herself shivering.

"El?" It's Mike's voice, sounding a little worried and a lot something else El can't identify, but understands intuitively. It's like the world has been tilted on an angle and all El can think about is that she needs to feel that again.

"Again," she breathes. She tilts her head to the side to make it easier for Mike and hopes she doesn't have to explain what she meant.

But she doesn't and Mike kisses her there again, on purpose this time, lips firm against the spot where her jaw meets her neck, just under her ear, and El's so very glad she doesn't have to explain herself because she forgets words entirely. His mouth lingers there, lips soft, breath fanning out against her neck, until El feels like she's going to explode out of her skin.

Mike moves his head, lips barely brushing along her skin, and kisses her again a half-inch down her neck and El decides that nothing has ever felt this good, it can't possibly have. She shivers and feels warm, too warm, all over.

And then Mike kisses her again, and then again, lips moving down her neck a little bit at a time. They're both breathing heavily, now, completely overwhelmed by each other. He shifts behind her, unwrapping his arms from around her waist so his left hand can cradle the side of her head, allowing El to let her neck go limp, while his right wraps tightly around her hip.

Mike leaves a trail of kisses down the length of El's neck until he reaches the spot where her neck meets her shoulder. This time, electricity explodes along El's skin when Mike kisses that spot and a high-pitched noise escapes from the back of her throat.

"El?" Mike's voice again, but this time, low and ragged in a way that

makes El tremble. She turns in his embrace and looks up at him. His eyes are dark as he looks down at her, lips parted and full, with an expression on his face that's part wonder and part something makes El's stomach do a weird swoop. She wonders for a moment how she looks to him, if any of the rapture she's feeling is painted on her skin for all to see. But there's something in the way Mike's looking at her that calls out to something deep inside of her and she rushes to close the miniscule distance between the two of them.

Their mouths meet and the shivering warmth that's wrapped around El swells into an all-encompassing heat. They've never kissed like *this* before, mouths slanting against each other over and over again, his hand tight in her hair, hers gripping his shirt, him leaning over her in a way that has her craning her neck a bit to keep kissing him.

She needs to make him feel the way he made her feel, she realizes with an urgency that speeds up her heart and makes it so she can't catch her breath. El pulls her mouth from Mike's and, just as he's starting to make a noise that's part complaint, part question, El presses a kiss to Mike's jaw and whatever noise he was going to make gets swallowed up in a gasp of his own.

She slides her lips up to the corner of his jaw before bringing them down his neck, his fingers still woven in her hair. Against her, above her, Mike's breathing grows even more ragged. But she can't stop. As much as El loves touching Mike's skin, she discovers she likes kissing it even more, especially when she can feel his heartbeat beneath her lips. Eventually, her lips land on the hollow above his collarbone and she presses a kiss there that has Mike gasping her name.

El lifts her head, pleased beyond all reason at the way Mike says her name, but before she can even blink, Mike's kissing her again. She gasps into his mouth, lips parting beneath his, and his mouth slides against hers, pulling her lower lip between his, tugging on it lightly.

El *needs* to be closer, so much closer. Her hands release Mike's shirt so she can wrap her arms around his torso, her hands pressing against his back to pull her flush against him. Mike groans against her mouth and the hand on her hip moves to the small of her back. El never realized until this moment how many nerves were centered in that one spot and she never wants him to stop touching her there,

never, and-

“Jesus Christ! Guys, I found them! They’re just sucking face again on the porch!”

Dustin’s voice is like a bucket of ice water and, like that, the moment is over.

“Ugh, fuck *off*, Dustin!” Mike all but yells.

El looks over at Dustin, sure that there’s a blush across every inch of her cheeks. Dustin waggles his eyebrows and smiles. “Alright, alright, I’ll give you kids 5 more minutes of privacy. But, remember Michael, be a gentleman.”

Mike flips Dustin off and, if there was anything handy, El’s sure Mike would have thrown it in Dustin’s direction. The other boy heads back inside as El giggles and buries her face against Mike’s shoulder. “Jeez, I’m sorry, El.” Mike sounds so despondent in a way that has El giggling even harder.

“Why are you sorry?” she asks, lifting her head to look at him.

Mike lets his head fall back against one of the chains holding up the porch swing. “It’s just...that was a moment for you and me, you know? It didn’t need Dustin interrupting.”

“Mike, there will be other moments,” El says, 100% sure of that.

“Yeah?” Mike asks, a hopeful smile pulling at the corner of his lips.

El leans over and gives Mike a light peck on the lips. “Friends don’t lie.” She stands up and grabs his hand, pulling him to his feet beside her. “Now, come on, let’s go back inside before they come out again.”

“You are something else, El Hopper.”

El grins at the goofy smile on Mike’s face. “So are you, Mike Wheeler.”

Notes for the Chapter:

well, that was a roller coaster

(and it's pretty clear it's going to take me a little while to get to El's first day of school, but i'm getting there, i promise)

9. Jul 19, 1985

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey fam. Sorry for taking a bit to get this out. Work's been kicking my butt; I've got, like 4 big projects I'm leading simultaneously and I wonder how this happens to me, even though I walk into it eyes wide open every single time.

Warning if you go to grad school, folks. Nets you nuttin but major 'sponserberleries (brownie points for those who know where that comes from and how badly did I just date myself?).

(Side note: I'm considering bumping the rating up to M, all because of language and Jim + the teens are serious potty mouths. I'm not going to yet, but let me know if I should since Jim really loves the f-word and the teens aren't far behind)

Jul 19, 1985

It feels like July just flies by, all hazy heat and teenage laughter and unrequited feelings – though that last one's more on Jim's part because this thing with Joyce just gets worse every damn day and he knows he's going to have to say something soon but, *dammit*, it terrifies him. He's faced down enemy combatants and government thugs and monsters from hell, but telling Joyce, who's all of 5'3" and maybe 110 pounds soaking wet, that he thinks he might be in love with her freezes him up like nothing else.

So, it's a combination of all these things in the background and more that has Jim walking into the station on a Friday morning in the back half of July feeling like he's woken up 5 degrees off kilter. Because, on top of everything else, El's been preparing to place into high school and it has Jim nervous as fuck.

El's been working with Nancy for weeks ever since Jim convinced Hawkins High to give her a chance. All she has to do, once Jim told

them the official backstory he came up for her, is pass the exit exams for Hawkins Middle with an average of 75% and she'll be good to go. So, almost every day, either before or after El hangs out with her friends, she meets with Nancy who helps test her and prepare her.

It's Nancy who's taken her over to Hawkins Middle this morning. At El's insistence.

("You don't want me to go with you?" – "Nancy's been helping me. She can quiz me last minute in the car. Besides, she gives good pep talks." – "Better than me?" – "She uses better words." – "Ouch, kid, that really hurts.")

So, Jim wishes her luck when Nancy comes over to pick her up and sends her on her way. It's not quite like sending your kid off for the first day of school, but it's close and Jim feels like the more El becomes real in the eyes of Hawkins, the more surreal everything feels to him.

Like, sometimes it hits him and he almost can't breathe at the realization of the second chance he's been given. And, yes, that second chance comes in the form of a girl who can throw people across the room with her mind and find people anywhere in the world with her psychic powers, a girl who never knew what it was like to be a normal kid until two years ago, a girl who comes with so much hurt, who hopes despite all the broken parts. But Jim gets it, because he's broken, too, and their broken edges fit together in a way that helps make them closer to whole.

So, yeah, Jim's in a weird mood today – weird and nostalgic and wistful all at the same time.

Which means it catches him by surprise and yet not at all when Flo knocks on his door two hours into his shift and announces, apropos of nothing, that Steve Harrington is here to see him. *Oh, this has to be good....*

It's official: Steve Harrington has lost his mind.

He sits in his car parked in front of the police station, just *staring* at the entrance. His leg bounces with nervous energy as he chews at the skin on the tip of his thumb.

This is crazy. This *has* to be crazy, right? Because in what world is Steve Harrington going to the Chief of Hawkins Police asking to become a police officer the sane thing to do?

The thing is, though, Steve's been agonizing over this decision for weeks since he first thought of the idea. Yeah, sure he still has options. He can go to Indiana State in a month if he really wants to. Major in who-the-fuck-knows-what and get a job away from Hawkins or, more likely, come home to end up working for his dad. Or, he could just skip the school idea and go straight to working for his dad.

But none of those ideas *feel* right, not in the way this one does when he first thought of it. And, Steve realizes he's been heading towards this moment ever since he first looked at Nancy Wheeler and decided he wanted to make out with her. Because, without that, he never would have ended up at Jonathan's house the night with the first monster, never would have ended up with the bat that Dustin asked after, and never would have been put in charge of making sure a bunch of 13-year olds stayed safe as his part in helping save the world.

Because, last November, Steve Harrington traded drunken wild parties for sober zany babysitting sessions and he's never been happier (except for the trajectory of his love life, because *woof*), even if the journey brought more nightmare fuel than any one person should be supplied with.

It's been fulfilling in ways he never anticipated, helping people, taking care of people. It brings a dizzying surge of protectiveness when he thinks of all the ways people he cares about could have gotten hurt and it makes Steve want to do everything he can to prevent any of that from ever happening. And, that's what makes a good police officer, right?

Right?

Steve sighs. *Alright, Harrington, time to stop being such a pussy and get your ass in there.* There's never going to be a good time to have this conversation with Hopper, but the longer he waits, the more his other options whittle away.

With that as a final, spurring thought, Steve gets out of the car and heads into the police station like a man on a mission.

He approaches the receptionist's desk and clears his throat to get Flo's attention, a charming smile painted on his face. "Good morning, Flo," he says once she looks in his direction.

But the look she's giving him is withering mixed with disinterest and it takes all of Steve's fortitude to keep from running back out the way he came. "Is there something I can help you with, Mr. Harrington?"

Ah, so she remembers him. Great. "Yes, I was wondering if Chief Hopper had a moment."

Flo gives him a once over – *probably trying to figure out the blood from the head injury is* – before she sighs. "You're lucky it's a slow morning, kid. Hold on, I'll see if he's got a minute." She gets up and maneuvers her way to the back offices of the station and Steve's left standing there, trying to make sure what he's wearing is appropriate for when asking someone to give you a job (*calvin klein jeans, a white button down, and loafers. this is ok, right?*).

A minute later, Flo comes back into view and crooks a finger at him, gesturing for him to follow her. "You're in luck, he's willing to give you 5 minutes," she deadpans.

Steve smiles, even though he's all nerves. "Good, great. 5 minutes is perfect."

Flo says nothing in response, but leads him to the door to Hopper's office. "Mr. Harrington, here to see you, Hop," she says, opening the door enough to speak to the man inside.

"Alright, let him in," Steve hears Hopper say through the door.

Flo steps aside and gives Steve a small smile. Why does she look like she pities him? "Good luck." *Oh, that's why.*

Steve swallows the lump in his throat and steps through the space Flo once stood. Hopper gives him an amused smile from where he sits behind his desk. “Steve Harrington, what brings you my corner of Hawkins?”

There’s a hard, sarcastic edge to the question that has Steve’s hackles rising just a bit as he shuts the office door behind him. “Good afternoon, Chief. Mind if I sit down?”

Hopper waves to the seat across from his desk. “Of course, please. Wouldn’t want to be rude, now would I?”

“Thanks,” Steve says before sitting in a rush. Out of nerves, he looks around to get his bearings – he’s never been in this office, before – and spies a picture frame on the corner of the desk, just angled enough so Steve can see what it is. It’s a picture of Hopper and El, only from a few weeks ago if the length of El’s hair is any indication. Hopper’s seated at what looks like the Byers’ kitchen table and El’s standing behind him, her arms wrapped around Hopper’s neck. Both of them are smiling for the camera and Hopper looks so happy in the photo it makes Steve’s stomach lurch in envy because his dad has never looked so happy in any picture he’s taken with Steve.

But, still, the sight makes Steve relax a bit. He knows this man, mainly through his adopted daughter, and Steve realizes there is common ground between him and Hop: if nothing else, they both love El. Sure, Steve loves her more like a big brother would than a father, but still, the affection is there. And Steve loves that little girl completely. After Dustin, she’s his favorite of the lot of them, always so free with hugs and smiles for him, always asking him questions and asking how he’s doing, *worrying* about *him*, and making things for him (he has a small box where he keeps the things she’s made for him; maybe, one day, he’ll tell her about it).

So, when Steve looks back at Hopper, the smile on his face is real and deep. “How’s El doing?”

The question is a good one, apparently, because the hard edge of Hopper’s smile falls away and the soft, content one that takes its place makes Steve feel like he might just make it through this conversation. “She’s good. Got those placement exams today, so she’s

been a bundle of nerves.”

“She’ll do fine,” Steve says. “She’s smart, really smart, and Nancy’s been helping her study for months now. She’s got this, 100%.” And he means it.

“Yeah, I know, just...I worry, you know?” Hopper sighs and leans forward, arms resting on his desk. “Anyway, you didn’t come down here to ask about El, not that I mind. But, really, what brings you down?”

Steve answers the question and Jim knows he misheard. He has to have. “You want to *what?*”

“Work here, with you. As a police officer.”

Ok, that’s it, now Jim’s heard everything. And, for half a second, it make absolutely no fucking sense. Until it absolutely does. “Huh,” is all Jim says as he leans back in his chair, elbows on the arm rests, fingers woven together over his stomach.

“Now, I know what you must be thinking-” Steve starts.

“That could work.”

“But, I think that – wait, what?” The look of confusion on Steve’s face is almost comical, but Jim’s too busy thinking through the implications to care.

“You’re young, athletic, reasonably smart, I’m assuming – get into college?”

“Indiana State,” Steve says, spluttering a little.

“Better than any of my guys, that’s for sure. Not that they’re not good officers, mind you, so don’t go saying nothing about this. But, out of my guys, Powell’s retiring in the next 5 years and Callahan’s good at following orders, but he’s kind of a fucking moron.” Jim sighs. “Plus,

you know about El and the lab and all the crazy shit that's gone on down here and I could use someone besides me in this station who does."

It goes without saying that Jim already trusts Steve, has been trusting Steve, with the knowledge about El's true origins and the kid's never even once done anything to make Jim regret it. In fact, the way Steve cares about El – always ready with a hug when he sees her, willing to watch whatever she wants when he babysits, the way he worried about people seeing her when the others wanted to do something outside while she still needed to be in constant hiding – says more about Steve's character than anything.

"So, you're serious. I can come work for you?"

Jim sighs, brought back to the moment. "Well, it's not like I can snap my fingers and tomorrow, you're a police officer, or anything. You still need to go to the Academy and get trained."

There's a look of apprehension on Steve's face that speaks more to his fear of failure than anything else. "Get trained how?"

"Weapons training, physical training, learning the legal code, that sort of thing. Takes a couple of months, all's said and done. As long as you made it through high school, you can make it through the Academy. Costs 500 bucks, though, to attend. You got that kind of money?"

Steve shrugs, looking all of his 18 years. "My dad does."

Jim raises an eyebrow. "He know you're tossing away college to become a cop?"

Steve scoffs. "My dad couldn't give a shit what I do. He wants me to work for him only so I don't become the great family disgrace. He'd pay 500 bucks to get me out of his hair."

"And, if he doesn't?" Jim hates to ask the question, but it needs asking.

Steve lets out a resigned sigh. "I have about 300 dollars saved up, mostly from you paying me to babysit El."

Jim thinks about this for a moment. Because, really, he likes Steve (can't believe it, but he does), and he knows what it means to have to live up to a disappointed father. "Well, look, if your dad won't cough up the money, let me know. Next class doesn't start until September and I'm sure there're enough odd jobs around the station you could do to earn the rest of the money in time."

Steve squares his jaw and Jim knows he's trying to steel himself for something. "And, if I do all that – get the money, go to the Academy and make it through – there'll be a job waiting for me when I get back?"

Jim looks him in the eye, dead serious in the way Jim knows Steve needs him to be. "Kid, you graduate in one piece, and I promise there'll be a spot here for you."

It's like the universe doesn't want Mike Wheeler to be happy. Like, at all. He's already a giant ball of nerves – El's taking her placement tests today, the ones that'll say if she can go to high school with them in the fall or not and Mike really, *really* needs her to pass them. Because he can't go back to only seeing her a few days a week. It's like the more he sees her, the more he can't *not* see her – which makes no sense, since it's a double negative, but it makes sense to his feelings and that's all his heart cares about.

He has plans to head over to El's house to wait for her to get home. Nancy spilled the beans about when El's tests were supposed to be done and that she'd know whether she passed well enough or not before she left (once El finishes a test, one of the teachers will grade it as she moves on to the next one so that El will only have to wait 30 minutes after her last one to find out her results).

So, when Mike hears what time El is supposed to be finished on the day of her exams, he plans to already be at her house, waiting for her. Because Mike knows, no matter the results, he's going to want to be there for her. If she doesn't pass, he wants to be there to reassure her that she's still got time before the school year starts to pass the

ones she didn't. And, if she does pass, well, Mike wants to be there to celebrate (and maybe score at least a couple of kisses in the process – he loves her, and everything, but after that night on Will's porch, she's gotten under his skin like an addiction he doesn't want to get rid of, like, *ever*).

But, as he's getting ready to go, Mike pops downstairs, jumping down the last four stairs to land at the bottom, to grab a snack for the journey and overhears his mom on the phone.

“...I just don't know, Lis. I just...can't talk to him these days, you know? I wake up next to him, when he's not sleeping in that damn chair, and it's like I don't know who this man I married is anymore. And, I've tried talking to him, but nothing changes. I don't even know why we're still married. And don't even get me started on the last time he even *touched* me...”

Mike's been frozen in place ever since he heard the despondent tones of his mom talking to someone (his mom has a lot of friends, it seems), but unfreezes when he gets even the barest hints his mom is talking about sex (because, *ew*), but her words stick in his head as he heads out the door, snack forgotten, and grabs his bike.

I don't even know why we're still married.

The words continue to rattle in his head as he bikes over to El's house, sounding off in time to each stroke of the pedals and, before Mike knows it, he's at El's house, the entire trip a blur.

Because, he knows, just knows with a sickening sense of foreboding, that his parents are getting a divorce.

A divorce.

Mike drops his bike to the ground and plops down on the front step. Hopper's cruiser's not in the driveway, so no one's here to answer the door even if he knocks.

Everything is going to change. He's going to have to move, probably to wherever his mom goes. Is it even going to be in Hawkins? Oh god, is he going to have to move away from Hawkins? Away from his

friends?

...Away from El?

No. No. Mike won't let that happen. He'll ask Lucas if his parents won't mind taking him in. Or maybe Dustin. Or he'll just live at school or something, *anything*.

But he's not leaving. He's just not.

The certainty in that thought, however, does nothing to calm the queasy panic building in his stomach, leaving Mike with nothing to do but sit and think.

Once Jim sends Steve on his way, buoyed with promises of employment, the rest of Jim's shift continues as planned. And, when he leaves early to be home for El when she gets home, he thinks the weirdness of his day is over.

But it's not.

Because Mike Wheeler is sitting slumped on his front door step looking like his world is ending.

Well, shit.

The kid doesn't move as Jim pulls up, doesn't even so much as twitch when Jim gets out of the car and closes the door a little louder than he normally would have, just to see if he can get a reaction.

Jim realizes this is no normal teenage funk going on. He's known Mike long enough, seen enough of his moods and mood swings, to know that some serious shit is going on with him and Jim feels so unprepared for any of this. He knows not everything is happy in the Wheeler household, but Mike's normally pretty good about being happy and upbeat for El, mostly because she makes him happy and upbeat.

There's been vague insinuations, though, about an unhappy marriage and a deteriorating relationship between the parents *and* father and son, but Jim's been able to ignore all that. Until now, it seems.

Jim sighs and heads towards the front door, boots crunching on the gravel lining the walkway. He stops in front of Mike and keeps his arms relaxed at his side. "Kid, what are you doing?"

The effect is immediate. Mike's head jerks up to look up at Jim and, in a flurry of lanky limbs and a cloud of black hair, rushes to his feet. "Hopper – Chief, um, sir."

Jim rolls his eyes. How many times does he have to tell him...? "Hopper's fine, Mike, really," he says and looks Mike in the face and – *Jesus*, when did this kid get so god damn tall? Jim maybe has 6 inches on the teen. *Maybe*. Wasn't it just yesterday when Wheeler barely came up to his ribcage? "Jesus, kid, what do they feed you at home, Miracle Gro?"

Mike flushes, temporarily knocked out of his funk if the flat look he gives Jim is any indication. "No, just regular food. I just...eat a lot of it."

Jim relates. He remembers being that age, remembers the bottomless hunger no amount of food could fill. His own height came first (he was 6'3" by the time he turned 16) and it took years for the rest of him to fill in. "Well, I'm going to assume you're hungry and invite you in for a snack while you wait. I take it you're here to wait for El?"

Mike nods, all earnest and love-struck. "I wanted to be here for her when she got home from her tests. No matter how it goes. I just figured she could, you know, use someone to talk to either way and, I don't know, tell her I'm proud of her, even if it doesn't go well."

That's the sweetest, goddamn thing Jim's ever heard, it almost gives Jim cavities. Part of him is relieved that El's boyfriend cares about her to the depth that he does, since dating was a thing that was going to happen eventually regardless of if he wanted it to or not (and Jim does, he really does; he wants El to be a normal teenage girl in all the ways she wants to be including dating and falling in love and really,

even if it were up to him, Jim couldn't choose anyone better for El than Mike, not with his fierce devotion and utter reverence for the girl).

But, the other part of Jim is desperately trying not to roll his eyes because it's just so goddamn maudlin and there's only so much he can take.

Instead, Jim smiles and pushes past Mike. "Well, I know she'll be happy to see you. C'mon, inside. It's hotter than hell out here. Don't know how you biked all the way over here."

Jim hears Mike following behind him with a muttered "It wasn't so bad" as he unlocks the door and heads inside. Once the door's shut, Jim gestures to the kitchen. "You know where everything is. Go ahead and grab something to eat while we wait."

Mike gives Jim a small smile. "Thanks," and pushes past Jim for the kitchen.

Jim sits at the kitchen table, watching Wheeler scrounge around for a few moments, before the kid joins him, holding a jar of peanut butter, a box of crackers, and a butter knife. "This ok?" Mike asks, eyebrows pushing up onto his forehead.

"Wouldn't have offered if it wasn't, kid."

Mike scowls a bit. "I'm not a kid."

Jim sighs. "I've got at least 20 years on you, Wheeler. You're a kid and will probably be a kid to me for quite a long time."

The scowl deepens, but Mike says nothing as he unscrews the lid to the jar and proceeds to slather peanut butter on cracker after cracker.

Wordlessly, Jim finds himself taking the knife and doing the same for a few and the two snack in silence for several minutes.

Jim gets up and pours a glass of water for himself and a glass of milk for Mike. "So," Jim says, breaking the silence as he sits down. "How's everything?"

Mike's eyes narrow at him as he sips at the milk. "Ok, I guess." There's a cautious tone to the words, like he can't figure out what angle Jim's trying to work. That, more than anything, sets off a couple of alarm bells in the back of Jim's mind. "Why?"

"Just, you know, saw you sitting on my front door like someone told you Christmas was canceled. Figured I'd ask, seeing as you are dating my daughter and you're important to her. Which means, you could say, that makes you important to me, too."

Mike's eyes widen just a fraction and he hurries to look down at the Formica table. Somewhere in the past few minutes, he's managed to tear off a corner of the flap for the cracker box and is fidgeting with it, pinching it with his thumbs and forefingers as he rotates it in tiny circles.

The silence stretches for so long between them that Jim begins to figure the kid's not going to say a word until El gets home.

But, then – "Are your mom and dad still married?"

Jim cringes at the question. *Oh, hell.* He sighs. "They were until my dad died 5 years back. Of course, if you ask my mother, she says they still are. Not even 'til death do you part' makes her think otherwise." Jim sighs again. "Why do you ask?"

Mike shrugs and Jim suddenly understand why his mom hated when he did that when he was a kid. Jesus, that tells him absolutely *nothing*. Jim knows the kid has words – he's heard Mike use them often enough when talking with El – so why doesn't he use them now? But, before Jim can push for more, Mike speaks. "My parents are getting a divorce." Jim's heart stops. "I think," Mike continues and Jim's heart resumes its beating even as it sinks. No kid deserves to be caught in the middle of his parents' marital problems, for fuck's sake.

Mike sighs, conflicted and frustrated. "I don't know. I just...."

"What?" Jim asks. Given how Mike's wearing his heart on his sleeve, Jim knows it won't take much pushing to get the kid to continue.

"I just want things to go back to the way they used to be," Mike says, his voice small. "When my parents loved each other, when they were happy." His voice begins to gain both volume and speed and Jim can't think of a damn thing to do to stop it from happening. "And I don't want them to get divorced. Because then my mom'll have to move out, she can't afford the house. She'll have to move down to Florida to live with my grandparents, since she doesn't have a job." Mike's voice starts to shake as his emotions snowball, his breath seemingly harder and harder to catch. "And I'll have to go with her because I can't live with my dad – all I do is disappoint him because I can't play sports or stand up the bullies like a real man – and I'll have to move away from Hawkins and my friends, away from *El*, and I can't. I *can't*. She was away for a year and I almost couldn't take it and that was before we got to spend all this time together. I don't think I can do it again, I just can't, but–"

Oh shit, this is turning into a panic attack. "Mike," Jim says, unable to keep the worry out of his voice.

"-I don't have anywhere else I can go and–"

Jim scoots his chair over and grabs Mike by the shoulders, one arm extending across the table to do so. "Mike, hey, *stop*." Mike does, looking at him with wide eyes, though his breathing is still out of control. "Breathe, ok? Breathe. Like this." Jim takes a slow breath in and out. Mike does the same – slow in, slow out. "Good, that's good. Now, listen to me." Jim takes a second to find the words he wants to say. "If, *if*, the situation with your parents gets to this point – that you might have to move away from Hawkins – come to me first, ok? We'll figure out something so you can stay in town, I promise. You understand me?"

Mike nods, shoulders relaxing a fraction under Jim's grip. Jesus, the kid is taut like a wire, ready to snap. "Yessir."

And, while Jim's here.... "And about your dad?" Jim doesn't miss the way Mike tenses right back up and Jim knows Mike is expecting to hear the worst. "Your dad's an asshole, ok? If he's disappointed in you, then fuck 'im. You're smart and brave and always willing to put other people first. Anyone should be proud to have you as their kid. And I know you can't change who your dad is and I know it's

probably not easy to talk to your parents, especially after everything that's going on and everything you've been through. But, if you ever need anyone to talk to, about anything, you can come to me, ok?" Jim pauses, thinking about that for a second. "Not about girl stuff, though, yeah? You're dating my daughter and there are certain lines we don't cross."

Mike just stares at him for half a second before a small smile crosses his face. "Thanks, Hopper."

Jim squeezes Mike's shoulders before letting go and leaning back in his own chair. "Any time, kid." Jim glances at the clock. "El should be home any minute, so let's get this cleaned up and wait for her in the living room."

And, sure enough, El comes home 5 minutes later, all smiles and bouncy jubilation, especially once she sees Mike. "I passed! I get to go to high school!"

After Jim hugs El, so proud of his little girl, he looks away as El embraces Mike and pretends not to hear the two of them kissing in a congratulatory greeting. He does hear the muffled "I'm so proud of you, El. I knew you could do it" as the two hug tightly and Jim just knows that's not the last time he'll hear Mike say those words.

(the next time will be thirteen years later, after the birth of his first grandchild, el tired and sweaty, mike just tired, both of them so full of awe and love for the life they will have just brought into the world. and jim will be happy he never doubted mike wheeler, will never regret welcoming him into the family jim and el made all those years ago.)

"Hey, this is cause for a celebration," Jim says. "Mike, why don't you stay for dinner, celebrate with us."

Mike looks between Jim and El, torn between uncertainty and happiness – it doesn't help that El is looking up at him with what Jim can only describe as doe eyes. "Um, but my mom–"

"Call her and let her know. I'll drop you off after dinner, though the sun'll probably still be up this time of year."

“Please, Mike, *please*,” El all but whines. “I wanna celebrate with you here.”

That cinches it. Mike’s shoulders slump a little, but he smiles – and Jim can commiserate; it’s almost impossible to resist El when she turns the persuasion on full blast. “Ok, I’ll call her and ask if I can stay,” Mike says.

That night, they dine on pizza and soda (Jim has a beer, instead) and El and Mike make brownies from a box mix – Jim licks batter from the spoon while Mike and El share the bowl, taking turns swiping their fingers across the concave surface – but none of them have the patience to wait long for the brownies to cool once they’re done, so they end up eating crumbled pieces from napkins off the kitchen counter. Jim knows it’s not much, but El’s looking happier than he’s ever seen her and Mike calms and steadies in her presence, like she’s a balm for his tortured soul.

A sense of peace settles over Jim and, though he knows it won’t last, for the moment, he’s happy. And he wouldn’t trade it for the world.

Notes for the Chapter:

So, for obvious reasons, I’ve been calling this chapter the Dad!Hopper chapter.

Also: fuck Ted Wheeler

10. Jul - Aug 1985

Notes for the Chapter:

Work can suck it.

(I love my job, I really do, but having to travel 2 hours each way on back-to-back days for year-end meetings can go diaf)

Jul- Aug 1985

Of course, having Mike over for dinner of pizza and brownies is not the only way El celebrates passing her tests to get placed into high school.

Jim figures El deserves something special, something specific. He figures she'll want something cute, something he can get gift wrapped at the mall.

He figures wrong.

Because what El wants when Jim asks her over breakfast the next day ("Anything?" – "S'long as it's not illegal.") is a slumber party. With just her and Max.

"You want a what?"

"A slumber party. Like on 'The Facts of Life'."

Clips of the show flash through Jim's brain along with that annoyingly catchy theme song. It's El's newest obsession and it kind of drives Jim crazy. But, Jim just sighs. "What would happen at this slumber party?" he asks, elbows leaning against the kitchen table.

"Pizza, movies, make-up, gossip," El rattles off. "That sort of thing."

"Uh-huh," Jim says. Does he sound apprehensive? He *feels* it. But.... "Ok, if you and Max can agree on a date, you can have a slumber party. Just...try not to be too loud, ok?"

"I promise," El says, a wide grin on her face, practically vibrating out her chair with excitement. Jim decides in that exact moment to buy himself a pair of earplugs. Lord knows it's the only way he'll get sleep during this sleepover, slumber party *thing*.

Teenage girls, man. Go figure.

Needless to say, Max is surprised as shit when El calls her at home midway through a Saturday morning. Her mom and step-dad are eating breakfast with her in the kitchen and Billy is who-the-fuck-knows where (Max thinks he didn't come home last night, but fuck it, she doesn't care).

The phone rings and Max's mom gets up from the table to answer it. "Hello?" Max watches as the look on her mom's face turns a little confused, but kinda happy?

"Yes, she's right here. I'll get her," Max's mom says and pulls the phone away from her ear. "Max, it's for you. A girl named Elle? Is this a new friend?"

Max freezes and, for a moment, she panics. Shit, if El is calling, something must be wrong, right? Not wanting to worry her mom, Max keeps her face cool. She hasn't told her mom about El, yet. "Oh yeah, she's the Chief's daughter."

"The Police Chief?" Is that...approval in her mom's voice? "Well, it's good you're making friends that aren't those *boys*," her mom says as Max gets up to grab the phone.

Max doesn't bother replying to her mom as she presses the phone to her ear. "Hi, El?"

"Hi, Max," El says. Now Max is confused because El sounds *happy*.

"So, um, what's up? Everything ok?" Max asks, stretching the phone cord as far as it will go as she rounds the corner out of the kitchen in an attempt to get out of earshot from her parents.

“Everything’s great. I just had a question for you. What are you doing next Saturday?”

Max chuckles. “Um, hanging out with you guys like every other day.” Max has been fully embraced by the Party – she couldn’t *not* be, not after what happened back in November – and it makes her warm in a way she’s never been before, this feeling of having so many friends who care about her. To say nothing about Lucas, with his soft lips and shy smiles, the way he holds her hand or laughs at her jokes – god, she likes him so much and barely has any idea what to do about it other than take it one day at a time.

El’s voice brings Max back to the present. “Well, I was wondering if you wanted to come to my house for a slumber party. Just you and me.” El’s voice sounds so hopeful that Max immediately knows she’s going to say yes.

“Oh, um, yeah, that sounds great. Hold on, let me ask my mom, first.” Max shifts the phone so the mouthpiece is pressed against her collarbone and she walks back into the kitchen. “Mom, El’s inviting me over to her house for a sleepover next Saturday. Can I go?”

Max’s mom smiles. “Of course, you can. Is Elle’s mom there? I want to work out the details.”

Max freezes. “Oh, um, El doesn’t have a mom. It’s just her and her dad.”

There’s a kind of sad look that crosses Max’s mom’s face, but she’s all smiles soon enough. “Well, then, can I speak with her father?”

“Hold on, let me ask,” Max says. “El?”

“Yes?” El replies, voice all eager.

“My mom says I can go, but she wants to talk to Hopper about the details. Is he there?”

El lets out a happy squeak. “I’ll go get him. Wait a minute.”

And, so, that’s how, a week later, Max ends up riding shotgun in Hopper’s police cruiser on her way to a sleepover. “Thanks for the

ride, Hopper.” She can’t believe how giddy she feels, right now, all smiles and bubbly excitement. In the back seat is a small duffle bag, with her PJs, a change of clothes for tomorrow, and her half of the makeup supplies she and El bought at the drug store earlier in the week.

(they spend what feels like hours picking out nail polish colors and lipsticks and eyeshadow palettes. max isn’t sure about the girly thing, but she’s excited to try. el promises that she’s going to pick out movies for them to watch and hopper’s going to order them pizza and they are going to stay up all night. she can’t wait.)

*(the boys are kinda upset when el tells them she and max are having a sleepover with just the two of them. “but the party doesn’t split up!” dustin raves. “yeah, but we’re girls, so we can make our own rules,” max says, leaning against el with her arm propped on the other girl’s shoulder, the two of them wearing twin smiles. she ignores the envious looks mike and lucas are throwing at each other while dustin exclaims, “yeah? maybe we’ll have our **own** sleepover!” – “go ahead, dusty.”)*

In the driver’s seat, Hopper breathes out a laugh. “What, you think I was going to let you ride out on that skateboard? It’s quite a way between our houses, kid.” The matter settled, Max enjoys the rest of the journey over to El’s house and hopes so much that this will be fun. Max has never been to a sleepover like this before, though all the girls in her old school had them all the time – it was just Max was never invited. The bitterness burns hot in her stomach, but it’s easier to push it aside knowing she has El waiting for her, having planned a small party for the two of them.

And when Hopper pulls into the driveway, Max watches as the front door flies open and Max barely has a chance to get both feet on the ground as she gets out of the car before El’s engulfing her in a tight hug that Max finds herself immediately returning. “Max, you’re here!”

“Jeez, Ellie, let her breathe,” Hopper says. “And what am I, chopped liver? Where’s my hug?”

“You were just here,” El says with an exaggerated glare and, as Max gets her stuff out of the backseat, she watches El go around the car to

give Hopper a hug despite the teasing between them. The relationship between El and Hopper makes Max miss her dad so, so much, but she's glad El gets to have this, gets to have someone like Hopper who cares about her so much. Max knows what happened to El in that lab and knows if anyone deserves a father who loves her and teases her the way Hopper does, it's El.

The night races along like planned and it's *awesome*. Hopper orders them pizza and sets up a small TV and VCR in El's room, so after dinner, they watch "Footloose" and "The Breakfast Club" while lounging on El's bed, dressed in their PJs. A hardcover book sits between them, serving as a table for bottles of nail polish as they paint each other's nails, their faces bearing the traces of the makeovers they gave each other while they watched Footloose and sang along with the songs. El painted Max's nails a bitchin' shade of purple, now Max is returning the favor with a candy yellow that El picked out.

"I wonder if high school is like in 'The Breakfast Club'," El asks as the characters in the movie all sit around in the library and get high.

"Probably not that glamorous," Max says, eyes flicking up towards the screen for half a second before she refocuses on El's nails. "I mean, I don't think anyone's going to be able to get away with getting high during detention. But, I think there'll be lots of different kinds of people."

"Hmm," El sighs. "Well, I'm still excited."

Max grins. "Wow, you sound disappointed you won't be getting high in detention."

El scoffs and rolls her eyes. "*Max*," she all but whines. "You know what I mean."

And Max does. Because El's going to get to go to school for the first time in her life and she'll be going with her friends. But Max knows that school can suck so bad sometimes and she's determined to do whatever she can to protect El from how shitty other teenagers are. "It's awesome you get to go to school with us in the fall," Max says. "We're all really excited for you, El." Max pauses. "Though no way

anyone's more excited than Mike."

At the mention of Mike, El smiles shyly and blushes a bit, which on anyone else, Max would think is sickening, but on El, it's just adorable. "Yeah?"

"Oh, absolutely," Max says, a grin pulling at her own lips. "He'll get to see you every day at school and tell everyone you're his girlfriend and *everything*."

"That'll be nice," El says. The conversation comes a close and, for a while, they focus on watching the movies and painting nails.

But, later, once the movie is over and both girls are sighing over Emilio Estevez kissing Ally Sheedy, Max has a sudden need to ask El a question she's been wondering for a while. "So, out of curiosity, what base have you and Wheeler gotten to?" Max swears she's just curious, but not even she fully buys it (she'll never admit it, not now, but she's looking to El for guidance in her own, weird, roundabout way. Because Max knows – hell, has *seen* it with her own two eyes – how much Mike and El are joined at the lips, and she's desperately curious and wants to maybe, kinda sorta figure out from what El can tell her how to get close to somewhere similar with her and Lucas).

But, El looks at Max with her head tilted to one side and Max just knows what El's going to say. "Base?" Because, of course, El was raised in a lab for 12 years and isolated in a cabin for another year after that and it's a punch to the gut how much El has to learn and it's not fair that she didn't get to be a normal teenager until now.

So, Max knows she needs to explain this the best she can, embarrassment be damned. But, where to start...? "It's, like, a baseball metaphor about sex," Max says. She pauses. Wait a minute.... "You *do* know about sex, right?"

El nods. "I learned about it from Nancy when I learned about science. Men and women have different parts and, when–"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Max says, holding up a hand, cutting El off. "No need to explain it since we both know. I just wanted to make sure you knew what it was. So, you know that guys and girls have sex

for fun, right? Or because they love each other and want to make each other feel good?”

El nods, but she's blushing a bit now, reaching out to grab one of her pillows so she can wrap her arms around it, her body all but curling around it. “Nancy explained that, too. She also said I should make sure I'm ready before I have sex, but I don't know how I'll know when I am.”

The statement resonates inside Max's chest with a hollow pang. “Tell me about it. They never explain that in health class. But, really, how will I know if I'm ready? I guess it's different for everyone and it'll just make sense, or something.”

“Yeah,” El says, commiserating, before she refocuses. “But what does this have to do with bases?”

It's Max's turn to blush. “Oh, right, sorry. So, you know how in baseball, there's 1st, 2nd, and 3rd bases, plus home plate, right?” El nods. “Well, someone, and I don't know who, came up with, like, sex equivalents, or something, for the different things you can do with your boyfriend or girlfriend.” Max takes a deep breath. “So, 1st base is French kissing-”

“French kissing?” El asks.

The question throws off Max's momentum. “Oh, um, it's kissing with tongues.”

The look on El's face is comical, the way her nose scrunches up and lips purse, her head pulling back in shock. “That sounds...kinda gross.”

“Supposedly, it feels really good,” Max says.

“How does it work?”

Max knows the theory, but is kind of unsure about the execution. How to explain.... “So, I think the way it works is that, when you kiss someone, you can open your mouth and, if the other person does the same, you can touch the other person's tongue with your own. Or something.” Max sighs. “I'm not sure, exactly, I've never done it

before. I take it you haven't, either?"

"No, not yet. I'm not sure if Mike even knows about French kissing." El looks at Max, her curious look back. "So, what are the other bases?"

Max lets out a giggle that betrays her nervousness. "Alright, so, 2nd base is...."

Max runs through what all the bases are, with much blushing on both girls' parts and, when Max finishes, El sighs.

"What is it?" Max asks.

"I haven't done any of the bases with Mike," El says. "But, I want to. I *really* want to. Eventually, though. When I'm ready."

"Hey, your body, your rules," Max says. She draws her knees up to her chest, warm and happy in El's room as they sit on her bed, soft yellow light from the lamps on El's nightstands bathing every surface. "So, what is it like, making out with Mike?" Because whenever the others catch the two making out, the look on El's face – a flush high on her cheeks, a satisfied smile framed by well-kissed lips – makes it seem like it's amazing.

The effect the question has on El is immediate and she blushes, smiling as she looks down at the surface of the bed, but the expression is shy, love-struck, and, dare Max say it, satisfied – all at the same time. "It's nice, *really* nice," El sighs. "It's mostly just kissing. Sometimes, Mike kisses my neck and right under my ear and he almost always has his hands in my hair. It always feels like it will never be enough, every time. And I hate it when we have to stop."

Max chuckles, though deep down she's a little envious. "You got it bad, don't you?"

"What?" El asks, the confusion cutting into the blissful look on her face.

"You totally love Mike Wheeler." The words come out as a statement, not a question. Because it's a foregone conclusion that El Hopper is in love with Mike Wheeler. As if it could be any other way.

El smiles, but the way she smiles makes her look far older than her 14 years. “I do. I think I always have.” And it’s enough to make Max believe in soulmates and destiny in a way she could never get behind before. Because there is something “meant to be” about Mike and El, like they were two halves of a whole waiting to find each other and they don’t care if the whole world knows it.

Max smiles and feels a little swept away by the emotions coming from El. “I’m happy for the two of you. I don’t think there are a lot of people who have what you and Mike have.”

El’s brow furrows and Max almost doesn’t want to hear what El has to say. “What about you and Lucas?” El asks.

Max cringes a bit, but manages to keep it mostly off her face. “I don’t know,” she sighs. “It could be someday, maybe. I want to find out, though. It’s not like you and Mike, though; not even close.”

“I hope it happens,” El says. “Everyone should be happy.”

Max knows that’s a pie-in-the-sky wish, but Max also knows El is far from naïve about how bad the world can get, so the declaration means something coming from the girl who was raised in a lab and has seen how truly bad things can be. “Thanks, but you know that doesn’t always happen.”

The smile that pulls at El’s lips has the depths of her dark history behind it. “I know, but I still wish, anyway.” It’s getting too heavy, Max can feel it – but El must feel it too, because her smile turns to a sly grin. “So, what base have you and Lucas gotten to?”

“Ugh, El!” Max whines through her sudden, relieved giggles and she grabs a pillow to lightly hit El in the face.

El lets out a shriek of laughter and, all of the sudden, the girls are embroiled in a pillow fight, completely unmindful of how loud they’re being, happy to just be two teenagers having fun.

(jim uses the earplugs and, bless, doesn’t hear a thing.)

July becomes August, signaling the beginning of the end of summer, and the back-to-school preparations creep up on the Party. Class schedules arrive in the mail, which sends off a flurry of comparing schedules to see which classes they share with each other. El and Mike are pleased to find that they share half of their classes together (Homeroom, Biology, Math, and English). And at least one of the Party members is in each of El's other classes: History with Will; French with Lucas and Dustin; and PE with Max. The one thing they all have in common is study hall during 5th period, which makes another hour of the day they'll share besides lunch.

El's excited, so excited for her first day of school. She has her class schedule; Nancy and Joyce took her back-to-school clothes shopping, with Nancy helping to pick out the perfect outfit for the 1st day of school. All is left is to enjoy the final weeks of summer and spend as much time with the Party – and Mike, especially – as possible.

That is, until, a handful of days into August, Mike's parents surprise the Wheeler siblings with an end-of-summer vacation to visit their grandparents in Florida, complete with a side trip to Disney World. It's Nancy's last summer before she goes off to college, the Wheeler family's last true opportunity for a summer vacation before Nancy officially enters adulthood, and Mike's mom wants to take advantage of every last moment. Any other summer, Mike would be ecstatic; he's been wanting to go to Disney World for *years* and he's loved going to his grandparents' house in the past. Instead, Mike paints a smile on his face and pretends to be excited, not wanting to disappoint his mom.

But he *desperately* wishes he was staying in Hawkins. He wants to spend time with El, as much as possible, before the school year starts and their days are filled with classes and homework and tests. He also wants to help her, wants to be there to make sure she's ready. Now, Mike won't be getting back from Florida until the day before the first day of school, so he won't see El until they're both on the high school campus.

Naturally, once Mike's out of his mother's line of sight, he pouts, sad and feeling stupid about it. It doesn't let up as the Party gets together that day at El's house and Mike delivers the news. Everyone's mostly happy for him (like, Disney World's seriously awesome), but it does suck that Mike is going to miss the rest of the last summer before high school.

It's the look on El's face that makes Mike even sadder, though. She's smiling, but it's a brave effort, one that does a horrible job of hiding the disappointment set in her eyes and in the lines of her face and it breaks Mike's heart. Because El doesn't want him to go as much as he doesn't want to go and it's just *unfair*.

The moping continues into the afternoon. While Max, Will, Lucas, and Dustin are settled in the den, a few steps down and one room over from the main living room, clustered around the TV as they cheer and jeer at "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom", Mike and El are snuggling on the couch in the living room. They can see the bits of the movie in the gaps between the bodies of the rest of the Party, but it's mostly just flashes of fire red and stone brown with the occasional glint of gold. Neither of them really care about the movie, though, having seen it at least a couple of times before.

No, Mike's trying to draw comfort from El and El's trying to cheer him up. And, in this moment, Mike's realizing how much he's going to miss El and it just sucks that he has to go.

"It'll be ok," El says, her words tickling Mike's ear from where her head lays perched on his shoulder. He's sitting on the couch, feet outstretched to rest on the coffee table, while El is pressed tight against his side. The warmth of her shoulder bleeds into his palm, his arm resting across her shoulders to hold her close, and it's comforting – just not enough, this time.

"I know," Mike sighs. "I just wanted to be there to help you get ready for school – tell you all the things you need to know that don't come from books. Like how to handle lunch lines and what to do if your locker is stuck."

El presses a light kiss against the corner of his jaw – a sign of affection more than anything, but it still makes Mike shiver a bit. It

always surprises him how much he loves it when she kisses him, no matter where her lips land. “You can still tell me those things, Mike. You’re not leaving for a few days.”

The logic is undeniable, but Mike doesn’t let it dissuade his mope. “It’s not just that, it’s....”

El lifts her head from his shoulder and pulls away. Mike can feel her eyes on him. “What is it?”

Mike looks over and, despite the disappointment swirling through him, his heart does a small flip at the sight of her – looking at him with soft eyes, beautiful face framed by gorgeous, gentle curls that just beg for him to run his fingers through (*how did he get so lucky?*). “I’m going to miss you. I talk to you every day and I don’t know how I’m going to handle not being able to.”

Something in the combination of the words Mike’s saying and how he’s saying them tugs at El’s heartstrings. And it’s not just her own disappointment at not being able to spend the last weeks of summer with Mike. He’s clearly hurting and it makes El want to do anything to make him feel better.

It doesn’t take her long to come up with an idea and, for a moment, El hesitates, unsure. Because there is a way she and Mike can still talk to each other, even though he’s going to be so far away. But it requires her to use her powers and that’s the thing.

Because El’s been practicing using her powers and hasn’t told anyone besides Hopper.

It’s not that she thinks Mike’ll be mad. It’s just that she’s been keeping this from him and she doesn’t want to make him more disappointed than he clearly already is. But, he just said he’s going to miss being able to talk to her every day, so....

El takes in a deep breath. “I have an idea,” she announces and hopes

this will go well.

Mike is confused. Like, really confused. “What?” he asks.

El grins, the expression tinged with a little uncertainty, but it piques Mike’s curiosity nonetheless. “I’ll show you. Wait here; I’ll be right back.” With that, El all but launches herself off the couch and runs upstairs, Mike left behind, watching her with what he’s sure is the stupidest confused look on his face.

El comes back down a minute later, holding what looks like her SuperCom in her hands. She sits back down next to him and hands over the device. “Here, take it.”

Mike keeps his hands where they are. “El, I don’t-”

“Take it,” she insists.

Mike sighs. He doesn’t understand what’s going on, but he knows how SuperComs work. The gesture is sweet, but.... “El, SuperComs don’t work at the distance between here and Florida.”

El arches an eyebrow at him. “Mike, take the SuperCom. *Please.*” Well, now Mike can’t *not* take the SuperCom from her. So he does, grabbing the device from her outstretched hands. “Now, turn it on,” she continues.

Mike raises his own eyebrows in incredulous confusion, but does as she asks, extending the antenna and flipping the switch on the side. There’s a hiss of static as the radio tunes to the frequency set on the dial. “El, I appreciate you trying to cheer me up, but this is-”

“How we’re going to talk while you’re in Florida,” El says.

But El’s mouth doesn’t move. And her voice comes from the speaker of the SuperCom instead of her lips.

Mike’s mouth drops. He immediately scans El’s face for the signs of a

bloody nose – the sign of her using her powers – but her skin is blood-free. “How....”

“I’ve been practicing,” El says, still talking through the SuperCom, looking completely unaffected, like it’s something she does every day. “I can find people anywhere in the world. If I can do that, I can talk to you from here while you’re in Florida as long as you bring your SuperCom with you.” She still hasn’t opened her mouth to speak, but there’s a smile on her lips like she’s proud of her abilities.

Happiness bubbles up from Mike’s stomach until he’s sure he’s smiling like a fool. “Has anyone ever told you how amazing you are?” Mike asks, words coming out in a soft breath. Because she is, she really is. His girlfriend is a superhero with super abilities, who likes painting her nails and watching sci-fi movies, who teases her friends with such quiet sass and underhanded sarcasm that he laughs every time, and who giggles whenever he brushes his fingers across the back of her neck and kisses him so sweetly, he never wants it to end. And he loves her more than he can bear.

El blushes at Mike’s words. “Not like you-”

El isn’t finished speaking, but Mike can’t contain himself as he leans in to kiss her, cutting her off mid-sentence so he can join his lips to hers. Kissing El feels like flying without fear of falling – soaring and tingly and just absolutely breath-taking. His fingers immediately find a way into her hair, like they have a mind of their own. And, really, he’s obsessed with her hair, with the way it feels between his fingers, all silky and smooth. He especially loves the way she gasps with just the hint of a whimper when his hand entwines with her hair.

El kisses him back with equal fervor, her hands resting on his chest, fingers curling against his shirt. Mike’s heart pounds at the feel of the heat from her palms bleeding through the thin cotton of his t-shirt and he groans softly, not wanting the others to hear from their spot in the den (not that they can over the sounds of the movie, but Mike just wants to be sure).

As if they’re both mindful of the fact that they’re not alone, the kiss draws to a close, but Mike doesn’t pull away. He rests his forehead against hers and just breathes her in, letting her overwhelm his

senses. “Thank you,” he says. *I love you*, his thoughts echo immediately following. He doesn’t say the words, though. Not yet. They burn on his tongue, push against the inside of his lips, but make no further effort to break free. The words just wait, wait for the right moment, wait for Mike to be brave enough. Almost, though – it’s almost the right time and the words will be ready when he is.

“Anything for you,” El says and Mike’s heart wants to burst from his chest, he’s so happy. He presses a kiss to El’s forehead and leans back against the couch cushions, tugging on her so she comes with him and ends up pressed against his side like she was earlier. El makes no effort to stop him and snuggles against him, filling Mike with a warmth so sweet and heavy, it makes his eyes burn. He says nothing, though, instead choosing to press a soft kiss to the crown of her head and let himself enjoy the feel of her in his arms, knowing no matter how long she stays, it will never, *ever* be enough.

Notes for the Chapter:

So, every chapter, I think the next one will be El's first day of school and it never seems to be the case. But, we're practically there, time wise. There's one more chapter between here and that first day. I know the story's not ending after that; I have an ending in mind that I'm working towards, but the length of time in story that passes from chapter to chapter is probably going to stretch out with larger time skips and glossing over passages of time (especially because they're going to be in school and there's only so much that can be written about that). I also have at least a couple of one-shots and a more mature chaptered story planned to go with this work, so it's going to become a series in the near future.

This says nothing about the Mileven AUs I have up my sleeve that haunt me when I'm trying to sleep. Don't know what it is about these two that get my creative juices flowing, but I haven't been so inspired to write in years.

(side note: i am **obsessed** with the idea of mike

being obsessed with el's hair. if that headcanon
doesn't come to pass, imma be disappointed)

11. Aug - Sept 1985

Notes for the Chapter:

The holidays are officially upon us and I've gotten very busy! The husband unit is finally out of classes for the winter and I can spend time with him again! ...And then this chapter took over my life. So, sorry this took so long, but...you'll see why at the end.

cackles and runs away

Aug - Sept 1985

Mike checks his watch for what feels like the millionth time as he crawls under the blanket spread across the couch at his grandparents' house. It sucks *a lot* that he gets relegated to the couch, but his grandparents only have two guest rooms and his parents are in one with Nancy and Holly in the other and, well, the only option for Mike is the couch. He's almost a little too tall, but he just has to deal.

The display on his watch reads 10:59, adjusted for the right time zone. One minute until his call with El.

Mike smiles as he remembers yesterday evening, his last night in Hawkins before leaving on vacation, trying to explain time zones. ("So, when it's 10 o'clock here, it'll be 11 o'clock where you are?" – "Yeah, exactly." – "But, why?" – "It has to do with the rotation of the earth." – "...That's weird.")

El hadn't entirely bought or understood the reason he gave and the look on her face had been so utterly adorable that Mike couldn't help but kiss her. His heart pangs with the memory of her lips pressed to his, soft and warm, but Mike knows he'll be with her again soon enough and, though the thought does little to console him, it's still nice to remember.

Almost all the lights are off around him except for the lamp on the end table by where his pillow is situated and it's on the dimmest setting, bathing the family room around him in a soft, yellow light.

Under the blankets, Mike turns to grab his SuperCom, which he'd placed on the same end table a couple of minutes ago. He shifts so he's laying down completely before flicking on the switch and extending the antenna. His mom had given him a strange look when she found out Mike was bringing his SuperCom, but she seemed to buy the explanation that he was just going to see what frequencies he could pick up in Florida and hasn't given it a second thought as far as Mike knows.

But, instead of pressing the button to talk with someone on the other end of the line, Mike speaks aloud. "El?" he asks, keeping his voice quiet, hoping she's there, watching him somehow (the thought brings a strange shiver skittering across Mike's skin and he doesn't know what to make of it).

"Hi, Mike," El's voice, quiet, comes through the speaker and Mike lets out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

In the Void, El watches as Mike climbs under the blankets and lays down, SuperCom coming to rest on his chest, and she waits for him to speak. She can feel her own body, distant like a faraway echo, back in Hawkins, lying in her own bed, but she's wholly focused on the sensory experiences of the Void.

The inky blackness surrounds the couch Mike is laying on, soft light draping over the surfaces, and El desperately wants to lay down next to him. The couch is pretty deep and the two of them are pretty slim, so they could fit. But El doesn't know exactly how that would work with her in the Void, so she just kneels down by the couch and waits.

"El?" Mike asks after turning on the SuperCom and El lets out a sigh.

"Hi, Mike." She focuses on sending her voice through the speaker of the SuperCom and knows it works when Mike smiles and sighs.

"Hi," he echoes back, sounding almost shy. "So, this is weird, but you can see me, right?"

“I can,” El says. “I’m sitting right next to you on the ground, by your shoulder.”

Mike turns his head to look in her direction. “I can’t see you,” he says, pouting in a way that El finds adorable, even if she feels the same.

El moves closer to the couch, leaning against it. Touching the couch sends weird tingles up and down her arms and legs, but El ignores it. “I’m not really with you.”

“I know,” Mike says. He shifts so that he’s lying on his side, facing her. If she was there, he’d be looking right at her. “At least I can talk to you.”

El smiles. “Better than nothing.”

“Exactly....”

Mike and El talk every night while he’s in Florida. On the fifth night, El decides to try lying on the couch with Mike while she’s in the Void. It’s a little weird, the feeling of almost touching each other. Mike feels her presence like the pressure of a soundwave – amorphous and unseen, but undeniably there. He can feel it when she shifts against him or the weight of her head as she snuggles against his shoulder and collarbone. And, though there’s no warmth from her presence, just knowing she’s there with him in some way, that he can *feel* her there with him, relaxes him more than he thought possible.

They fall asleep that way on that fifth night and every night after that and, though Mike hates the empty feeling of waking up with her not next to him, he knows she’ll be with him again come nightfall (seriously, having a girlfriend with superpowers is *awesome*).

So Mike spends his days at the beach or at Disney World and soaks in the Florida summer sun. And at night, he crawls under the blankets set up for him on the couch and waits to hear El’s voice come from

the SuperCom and to feel the strange, distant weight of her lying next to him. And every night, they talk for what feels like hours, telling each other about their days, having, for the first time since reuniting, days filled of completely separate experiences to talk about since back in Hawkins, they do almost everything together that they can.

Inevitably, their conversations turn to how much they miss each other and how they can't wait until Mike comes home so they can see each other again and what they're going to do when they're back together. Each night, they fall asleep together and, the next day, do it all over again.

Despite the fun Mike manages to have during the three weeks in Florida, he's itching to get back home, back to El. And somehow, both before he knows it and *finally*, it's his last day in Florida and he's heading home. He thinks he might have time, as the rest of his family is preparing to travel home, to see El when he gets back to Hawkins tonight. God, just the thought of actually *seeing* her, not just feeling her distant presence, of being able to talk to her face to face, to touch her and kiss her and hold her and just *be* with her, makes his heart beat so fast with excitement that it almost makes him feel dizzy.

But getting home goes way worse than planned. Their flight back to Indianapolis is delayed by several hours due to thunderstorms and, by the time the Wheeler family gets home, it's just past 8 at night and everyone's scrambling to get things ready last minute for school the next day. There's no time for Mike to go see El, no time to talk to her before school starts the next day and he can't help the way his heart sinks a little at the realization.

However, by the time Mike's crawling into bed, exhausted from the day of travel and the last minute preparations, he smiles because, tomorrow morning, he's going to get to see El again and she'll be with him at school all day.

As he drifts off to sleep, Mike feels the familiar there-but-not-there weight of El lying next to him, arm draping across his chest, head pillowed on his shoulder. *Welcome home, Mike*. El's voice whispers in his mind. *Missed you*.

“Miss'd you, too,” Mike murmurs. And then he's asleep, finally home and almost back to her.

For El, the weeks leading up to her first day of school are full of chaotic and often conflicting emotions. She's excited, to be sure – she gets to go out every day as a real person who doesn't have to hide, gets to be with her friends at school and be a normal 14 year old girl. But she's also scared and nervous in ways she didn't expect. She scared about not doing well in her classes, about how the other kids in her class will treat her, about being with that many people all day, every day.

Naturally, with all this emotion swirling around her, she obsesses over making sure everything is perfect for that first day and she wishes Mike was here. Yes, she talks to him every night while he's visiting his grandparents and she's able to sort of touch him and lay down next to him when she sees him in the Void, but it's not the same and she could really use a hug. She loves the way Mike hugs her – the way his arms engulf her and hold her close to him, the way he presses his cheek against her head so she can feel his breath ghosting against the hair on the top of her head, the heat of his body warm against hers.

But Mike's not here, so she takes the small comforts where she can get them. She still gets to see him every night, still gets to talk to him and hear about his day. She watches, fascinated, as the days of his vacation go by, how his skin changes color, going from pale to pink with sunburn to a light tan. And, more pertinent to El, the number of freckles on his skin *multiplies* in a way she just adores. Sometimes, if Mike falls asleep before she does, she'll spend endless minutes tracing the constellation of freckles across his cheeks and nose, following the scattered trail to his jaw and neck, down to the collar of his shirt. She knows from when the Party goes swimming at the lake that the freckles spread to his shoulders and the skin of his back, but she doesn't dare try to move his shirt in the Void to touch him there, as well.

*(she can't wait for mike to get back so she can touch him for real and she wants, el realizes with a fierce blush, to track the pattern of freckles across mike's skin as far as it goes, **wherever** it goes. and the thought does such weird things to her insides that she has to focus on something else almost immediately every time her mind wanders down that path because it's too much and she wants so bad that she doesn't know what to make of it or what to do about it, but she **so badly** wants to figure it out with him.)*

But, sooner than El expects and longer than she wants, it's the first day of school and Hop's pounding on the door to her room in a rush to wake her up. Her heart leaps in her throat, a swirl of nerves, excitement, and just sheer eagerness to see Mike again and El races out of bed to shower, 15 minutes ahead of her alarm. She hopes, with the 15 minute head-start, that she'll be there early, that she'll be able to spend a little bit of time with the rest of the Party before Homeroom.

(She'll only arrive 5 minutes before Homeroom because it takes Hop far too long to find his keys. Of all the days....)

Mike can't decide if he's nervous or excited to start his first day of high school, but he eventually decides over a quick breakfast of eggs and toast that it's a bit of both. High school feels like such a monumental step to be taking, like he's entering a new stage of life.

Off to his right at the breakfast table, Nancy chuckles. "Looking forward to your first day of school, little brother?"

Mike smiles over at her. "Yeah, I think so. 'M also excited to see my friends." *And El*, he thinks, but doesn't say – not with his parents nearby.

But Nancy can hear the unspoken words, Mike can tell, from the way she smiles at him. "I bet you are," she says.

Mike finishes up his breakfast and hopes that his outfit is good enough for the first day of school (dark blue jeans, a light blue, long

sleeve button down, and a pair of sneakers). It's dumb to worry about, but the first day of high school is *forever* and Mike wants to make sure everything goes as well as it can.

At the same time as all of this, Mike is equally excited for El – it's her first day of school *ever* and there are not enough words in the English language to describe just how proud Mike is of her and just how thrilled he is that she gets to do this like every other normal 14 year old girl. He can't *wait* to be there at her side, experiencing this with her.

A few minutes after Mike finishes up his breakfast, the doorbell rings. His mom answers the door and immediately calls out for Nancy and Mike. "Jonathan's here! Time to go, guys!" Nancy and Mike are riding to school with Jonathan and Will and, upon announcement of their arrival, it's a frantic rush on both Nancy and Mike's parts to gather up their things and run out the door, each giving their mom a quick goodbye kiss.

Nancy climbs into the front passenger seat as their mom calls out her goodbyes while Mike slides in next to Will in the back seat.

From the driver's seat, Jonathan leans over to give Nancy a good morning kiss. He lingers a bit longer than normal, Mike notices with an eye roll, but, just like him and El, it's been three weeks since Jonathan and Nancy have seen each other, so Mike says nothing and just shares a look with Will. "Hey," Jonathan breathes after the kiss ends. "Almost didn't know if you'd made it back from Florida."

Nancy chuckles. "I missed you, too, Jon."

Jonathan shakes his head, bemused, and turns to give Mike a smile. "Hey, Mike. Excited for your first day of high school?"

Will lets out a laugh. "And to see El, again," he says, making Mike groan while Nancy and Jonathan laugh. He can't really deny it, though. He's practically *itching* to see her again.

Jonathan drives away from the Wheelers' house and, less than 10 minutes later, pulls into the parking lot for Hawkins Senior High School. Suddenly, Mike's heart is in his throat, as he gets out of the

car and walks alongside Will, backpack strapped securely around his shoulders. He's filled with all the worries he hopes other new freshman are filled with: hopes that he fits in, hopes that he doesn't stick out too much, hopes that he can avoid bullies and pranksters among the upperclassmen.

Up near the entrance, Dustin is already waiting for them, having been the first one to arrive. He smiles as he spots Mike and the others. "Hey, guys! Glad you could make it."

Jonathan reaches out to ruffle Dustin's hair. "Waiting long?"

Dustin swats away Jonathan's hand. "Hey, man, hands off the hair," he whines, but continues on with a smile on his face. "No, I got here a couple of minutes ago. I didn't want to go in by myself, though. We stick together, yeah?"

Nancy smiles and Mike thinks the soft laugh she lets out sounds fond and caring; Mike's glad he can hear it over the din of other students milling around, shouts, cheers, and laughter of friends reuniting after a long summer echoing around him. "Well, Jonathan and I are going to head inside. Mike, say hi to El for me when she gets here, ok?"

Mike smiles. "I will."

Nancy gives Mike a soft punch on the shoulder as Jonathan gives Will a side hug. "Good luck, today," Nancy says and Mike thanks her before she and Jonathan disappear into the crowd and it's just Dustin, Will and Mike waiting outside in the arrival area.

"So, how was Florida?" Dustin asks and Mike lets answering the question distract him for a few minutes. Max and Lucas show up next, Lucas on his bike while Max holds on to the back of the seat as she coasts on her skateboard. Max and Lucas walk up to them, holding hands and looking very comfortable doing so and, suddenly, all the Party is waiting for is for El to show up. Mike's heart beats hard and fast in his chest and his palms feel clammy. It's been three weeks since he's seen her and the wait is nearly unbearable and he hopes so hard his nervousness doesn't show.

So he stands and talks with the others and tries to ignore the electric

tension across his skin, knowing that it's impossible to do so, but he has to try anyway. And he tries, focusing every bit of attention on listening to his friends tell him about the last three weeks without him.

So, it catches Mike off guard as he's listening to Dustin tell him about a last-minute camping trip the previous weekend when he stops mid-sentence. Dustin's gaze suddenly focuses on somewhere behind Mike's left shoulder, eyebrows rising up towards his hairline, an amused grin on his face. "Dude," Dustin breathes (Max and Lucas are also looking at where Dustin is focused and their faces equally amused), "I love El like a sister, and everything. But Mike? Your girlfriend is *hot*."

Mike's ready to call Dustin out for his shit out of reflex as he turns, heart singing as he realizes El is *finally here*. But then he spots her and-

Holy shit. *Holy shit*.

El is walking towards them, attention torn between smiling at them and looking nervously around at the crowds of students milling about. And she looks *amazing*.

She's wearing a baby pink, wide-necked sweater that shows off the delicate sweep of her collarbones, the fabric clinging tight to the lines of her body. She's paired that with a black pleated skirt, hem brushing a couple of inches above the knee, and a clean pair of white chucks. And her hair (*god, her hair*) is loose and free down her back, curls brushing against her shoulder blades, with only a couple of small barrettes holding the hair away from her face.

Mike can't breathe. Holy shit, he can't breathe. He doesn't know if being away from her for three weeks made him forget what El looks like or if she performed some sort of magic this morning, but he is utterly spellbound, *transfixed*, by the sight of her.

*Jesus Christ, when did her legs get so long? And has she always been so curvy? Shit, Wheeler, eyes on her face, **eyes on her face!***

"Guys, I think he's going to pass out," Mike hears Will say and it's really a distinct possibility. Because the sweater El's wearing shows

off the shape of her in ways Mike could never imagine before, but never wants to forget, and as she walks towards them, the gentle sway of her hip causes the pleats of her skirt to shift around her thighs, tantalizing him with bare glimpses of the skin just beneath the hem. And her hair is begging for him to run his fingers through and the way she's looking at him just makes him want to kiss her and never *ever* stop.

"Get it together, dude," Dustin says, giving Mike a sharp slap between his shoulder blades. The shock is enough to make Mike gasp and the air that fills his lungs is sharp and clean from the coolness of the morning.

"Thanks, man," Mike says, voice hoarse.

"No problem," Dustin says.

"Yeah, you're going to need all the help you can get," Lucas says.

Before Mike can ask Lucas what he means, El's there and it's like there's nobody else around. "El, you made it!" Dustin says as a greeting and reaches out to give her a hug. "You're finally in school with the rest of us."

El returns the hug (Mike's not jealous that Dustin hugs her first, not at all, no way, nope). "Morning, Dustin."

The rest of the Party gives El a hug, except Mike, because he's not sure that, if he hugs her, he'll be able to let go. So, he hooks his thumbs around the straps of his backpack and hopes that helps him keep his hands to himself.

"Guys," Will says, "Let's head in. Homeroom's going to be starting soon."

Mike lets out a nervous cough. "You guys head in. Can you give me and El a minute? We'll see you in there."

The other four disappear inside and it's just Mike and El standing out there (well, there's still a bunch of other people, but none of them even really register to Mike in this moment).

El smiles shyly and looks up at Mike, a slight look of concern on her face. "Is everything ok?"

With her up close, Mike can see the light makeup she's wearing (not that she needs it, she *never* needs it) and he thinks the shimmer of her eyeshadow brings out the flecks of gold in her eyes. God, he wants to kiss her so bad, but he can't – not here, not with so many people around. So, instead he just smiles, knowing he looks like a love-sick fool. "Just wanted to talk to you alone for a minute," Mike says, praying and hoping his voice decides to behave and not do that stupid cracking thing in this exact moment. "I missed you, you know."

The bright smile El gives him makes his heart skip several beats. Jesus, how does she do that to him *every time*? "I missed you, too. I'm glad you're home."

Mike smiles and glances down at the ground for a brief moment – looking at her is sometimes like looking at the sun and he can't stare too long if he ever wants to be able to see anything else. "You look gorgeous today, by the way."

His words bring a light flush to El's cheeks and it makes her look even prettier. "Yeah?"

Mike nods, still smiling. "Yeah," he says. "I mean, you always look pretty, no matter what. It's just –" he risks a glance down at what El's wearing and it takes entirely too much effort to look at her in the eye again – "You look really, *really* good today."

"Thanks," she says. "You do, too." And then she's leaning up towards him and Mike knows she's going to kiss him and he's not going to be able to stop her and then he's never going to stop kissing her and-

The 5-minute warning bell rings, causing El to freeze inches from him. Mike smiles, somehow both relieved and disappointed all at the same time, and grabs her hand. "Come on, that's the warning bell. We should go in, find where Homeroom is."

"Ok, lead the way," El says, smiling back at him, and lets him drag her in through the front doors. Mike never thought it was possible to

be this happy and he hopes it's a sign of what's to come. Because El's finally in school and never has to hide and can be with them, with *him*, every day and it's all he's ever really wanted.

High school is nothing like El ever imagined. There are so many people, all going a million directions, and they're *always* talking.

She likes her classes...she thinks. For the first few periods, El doesn't understand why everyone has to get up and introduce themselves at the start of each class. But then Mike explains it's to introduce themselves to their teachers and to kids they may not have had in earlier classes.

So, El waits her turn, watching for the cue from her teacher, to stand up and say, "Hi, I'm Jane Hopper, but you can call me 'El'." She has an explanation ready for the nickname (her middle name is Eleanor), but no one ever asks and whichever teacher is leading the class writes a note in their gradebook to indicate the nickname and then moves on to the next student. Though, more often than not, not without remarking on the similarity between her last name and the Police Chief's, which sends several pairs of eyes her way when El explains that the police chief is her dad.

The first time El tells everyone that Hopper's her dad, it sends a flurry of whispers throughout the class, and it's invariably one of the first things her fellow classmates ask her between classes. Because they do. A *lot*.

It seems like *everyone* wants to talk to her, often ambushing her before one of the Party can get to her, which leads to several awkward situations when some of the more popular kids wonder what the new kid is doing with the Nerd Squad when one of the Party approaches her and El doesn't know what to do about it. (What does it matter who's she's friends with? It doesn't – or it shouldn't, and El can tell it somehow manages to matter a great deal for reasons she just doesn't understand.)

Still, she makes it through the morning, Homeroom first, then Math, English, and French before lunch. She's so grateful to have Mike with her most of the morning (and he looks so *good* in that button-down shirt, it sends a shiver of butterflies off down her spine) and she misses him terribly when she's in French. She appreciates Dustin and Lucas' presence, though, as they try to get through their first day with the foreign language.

But, despite making it through the morning all right, it somehow manages to go sideways when the bell rings signaling the start of the lunch period. El gathers her things and, before she can turn to Dustin and Lucas, a small squad of girls her age are standing in front of her. El blinks, wondering if appearing from thin air is a power other girls have. "Hi?"

"Hi, you're having lunch with us today," the leader – who El thinks is named Marci – says with an air of self-assurance El can only dream of having.

"I am?"

"We're the welcoming committee and it's our job to make sure all the new kids are welcomed. We might be freshman, but we all went to school together back at Hawkins Middle and you're the only new kid, so we want to make sure you get off on the right foot," another girl (*Jennifer? Jennifer.*) says.

"C'mon, let's go so we can make sure we get a decent table," another one says and El has no idea who her name is, but it doesn't matter as she finds two of the girls have looped their arms around each of hers and are guiding her out of the classroom, all talking a mile a minute. El glances back at Dustin and Lucas, but they're absorbed in talking about *something* and don't see what's going on.

El's torn between letting them know she wants to eat with her friends and not wanting to be rude and stand out too much. Because she was warned not to stand out ("No powers, nothing suspicious, no anything, you got that?" – "Got it, Hop.") and El doesn't know what will and won't make a scene.

"So, your dad's Chief Hopper?" Marci asks.

"My mom says he got some woman knocked up in Indianapolis, is that true?" another girl says.

"Nu-uh, Stacy, my mom says he took El in from, like, an orphanage, or something. Right, El?"

"Um, my parents were his second cousins, I think," El says, reciting the cover story, as she's led down the halls of the high school. She tries to pay attention to where she's going, so she can remember how to get to the cafeteria, but everything is happening so fast and she just wants to find her friends and *Mike* and eat with them. But all her classmates have been crowding her all day and now they've abducted her for reasons El can't wrap her head around.

God, she wishes she knew what was going on.

Max does, though. When her, Will, and Mike watch as El is led into the cafeteria, surrounded by a horde of the popular girls, Max is not surprised.

"Wait, why is El with Jennifer Hayes and Marci Goldman's clique?" Will asks.

Max watches as the look on Mike's face turns from concerned, to hurt, to resigned, and finally to angry all in a handful of seconds. "What happened in her French class? Where are Dustin and Lucas? Why is El with those girls?" Mike asks. Max can hear the fear in Mike's voice clear as day and she wonders how she gets drawn into all this drama.

"Relax, she's not abandoning you, lover boy. They probably ambushed her in class and you know El, always trying to be polite, let them abduct her. I'll go get her." Max hops out of her seat with a shake of her head.

Because Max was expecting this. *It was only a matter of time, really.* Because El's not only the new girl, she's the new girl who's the

daughter of the police chief and she looks like a freakin' model – all svelte silhouette and soft skin and wide, doe eyes and lush, bouncing curls. El naturally starts high school high on the totem pole with built-in advantages like that and Max is kicking herself for not realizing it sooner, for not warning anyone.

Looks like Wheeler's figured it out, though. Max finds herself feeling sorry for Mike. She's heard more than a handful of whispers from guys – and not just freshman – about how pretty (*hot*) El is and it's only the first day of school. Mike Wheeler's going to have to figure out how to get a handle on his temper so he doesn't overreact to everything and he has to do it *fucking fast*.

Max approaches the spot in the cafeteria line where El is waiting for the rest of the group to pay, holding her own tray close to her chest. "Hey, Hopper. C'mon, the guys are at a table over there," Max says.

The smile on El's face is so full of relief that Max wants to give her a hug. "Thanks, Max."

"Mayfield, *what* are you doing?"

Max sighs and rolls her eyes dramatically, but otherwise ignores Marci – luckily, she could give a flying fuck what Marci Goldman thinks. "Follow me, El."

El does so to the sounds of offended squawks from the popular crowd. "Thanks, Max," she says as the two of them weave their way through tables and people.

"I got your back, Ellie. Gotta watch out for those girls – meaner than starving sharks in a bloody ocean."

A small grin pulls at the corners of El's lips. "That bad?"

"Well, I'm sure you'll find out soon enough," Max says before she pauses and gives El a grin and a once over. "Though, somehow, I think you'll find a way to stay above the fray."

"What do you mean?"

Max chuckles – El is too cute when she's confused – and shakes her

head. "Later. If Wheeler doesn't get the chance to stare at you mooningly in the next 30 seconds, his head's going to explode."

Mike's a swirling ball of angst and anxiety. Well, not *literally*, but he feels the heart-racing emotions settle in his stomach and he wants to kick himself for being an idiot. Because how could he not have seen that all the popular kids were going to want to be friends with El? Because she's nice and so fucking beautiful, *of course* other people were going to see it.

*What if she decides she wants to be friends with the popular crowd? What if she doesn't want to be with the Party anymore? What if she doesn't want to be with **me** anymore? What if she realizes she can do so much better?*

Of course, once Max approaches the popular girls and leaves with El at her side moments later, Mike feels some of the tension leave. But most of it is still there.

"Don't worry, Mike," Will says.

Mike finds himself dragging his gaze from El to look at Will. "What?"

"El would never want to be friends with those girls. She's not the type to stick with people like that. They're too mean and you know El."

Mike does, he really does. But, before he can thank Will, he sees El sit down next to him out of the corner of his eye and all his attention reverts to her. And when she looks up at him, all soft smiles and lightly flushed cheeks, all his stupid concerns melt away. "Hi, Mike," she says.

"Hey, El." Mike watches as El's gaze flickers down to his mouth and he realizes with a barely restrained groan that she wants to kiss him and he finds himself starting to lean in and-

"Guys, please, not while we're trying to eat, I *beg* you," Max says,

interrupting the moment.

El gives him a small smile that's both sly and apologetic before turning to her tray of food. "Sorry, Max."

Mike's momentarily speechless because he's enchanted by that sly grin El gave him, but he recovers by the time Dustin and Lucas join the table. "Hey, El, where'd you disappear off to?" Dustin asks

"Jennifer Hayes and Marci Goldman abducted her," Max says, stealing El's thunder.

"Yeah, guys," Mike says, glaring a bit.

Lucas grimaces. "Shit, sorry El. Didn't mean to leave you to the wolves like that."

Max scoffs. "Problem is they see El as a potential wolf," she says before looking back over at El. "Not that you would ever become a wolf, El."

El looks a little confused, which makes Mike grin, but she shakes her head, clearly having understood the gist of what Max is saying. "They're too high-pitched. I like you guys better."

"Aww, see, I told Mike you would never abandon us," Will says.

"Never," El says emphatically. Everyone reassured, they move on to catching each other up about their classes and other various bits of gossip they were able to overhear.

And, though Mike's participating, inside, he's dying a little. Because he still really, *really* wants to kiss El, like he's going to burn out of his skin if he doesn't get to kiss her soon.

And it only gets worse when movement out of the corner of his eye pulls his attention away from his food and it's El crossing her leg away from him, which causes the hem of her skirt to shift and reveal another inch of the skin of her thigh and Mike *really* wants to place his hand on that exposed expanse of skin and-

"Mike, did you hear me?"

The sudden question – from Lucas – causes Mike to jerk back to attention in a flurry of motion, his knee hitting the underside of the table with enough force to bring tears to his eyes. “Ow, *shit*.”

“Dude, stop staring at your girlfriend and pay attention, ok?” Dustin says, a shit-eating grin stretched across his lips.

“You ok, Mike?” Will asks.

Mike rubs the curve of his knee and winces a bit. “Yeah, I’ll be fine. What did you say, Lucas?”

The rest of lunch goes by smoothly (though Mike has to struggle to keep his face appropriately neutral when he feels El’s slim hand cover his knee to soothe the earlier hurt and it is Not. Helping.)

Study hall’s just after lunch and the Party manages to get some of their homework done and the majority of that work for El is working with Lucas and Dustin on French.

Then comes Biology and Mike manages to snag an empty lab station for him and El. She slides onto the lab stool next to him and, like that, they’re lab partners for the year and Mike’s feeling triumphant. He can’t stop some of the jerkwad boys and mean girls from trying to talk to El after class, but it doesn’t bother him nearly as much as it did earlier (El hooking her foot around his ankle 5 minutes into class and keeping it there for the rest of Bio, occasionally rubbing his calf and shin with her toes, helps a lot in that regard).

But then, he’s separated from her for the rest of the afternoon and it Mike feels it even more keenly than he did when she went off to French. Because the need to be close to El has only gotten more intense and it’s not helped by the three week separation they just endured. And he’s so overwhelmed with emotion as he watches her in the classes that he does have with her – taking notes and asking questions, being genuinely curious about everything – he’s so proud of her and it feeds off both the feelings he has for her and the way he’s missed her, both of which, in turn, feed off his pride in a such vicious cycle that he barely makes it through his last two classes intact. He spends the last two hours of the day a jittery mess – a knee bouncing, pencil tapping jittery *mess*.

So, when the final bell rings during Mike's History class, he rushes out of the classroom to grab his things from his locker. The Party is supposed to meet outside the front doors to head to Will's house for a study session and he supposes he'll meet them out there eventually, but he *needs* to find El. *Now*.

He roams the halls for a minute or two, need burning a pit in his stomach and making his heart race, before he hears the sound of El's giggles and stops, spotting her in an instant.

El hasn't noticed him yet, which gives Mike a moment to just *stare* at her. She's standing in the middle of the locker hall next to Max in a group of 7-8 other kids who he doesn't know – they aren't the most popular kids, but they're definitely higher up the food chain than Mike. But he barely notices any of those things.

Instead, he's focused on the way El's smile lights up her face, on the way her eyes crinkle when she laughs, on the way her honey-brown curls bounce and whisper against her skin as she talks and looks around at the other kids she's meeting for the first time. She's just so beautiful and he loves her so, so much that he can't take it anymore.

And then he's moving towards her, unable to be apart from her any longer. He needs to be near her, needs to touch her and kiss her. Right. *Now*.

Mike walks towards her like a man on a mission, determined and undeterred despite all the people milling about.

El notices him when he's about 5 feet away and she looks pleasantly surprised for half a moment before she smiles. "Mike, hi! Sorry, we–"

El never gets to finish her sentence because the moment Mike's close enough, he reaches for her, fingers sliding into her hair, tipping her face up, and kisses her like he's been dying to do for weeks – mouth slanting against hers, her bottom lip trapped between his, her gasp brushing against his skin.

"Holy shit, Wheeler!" he hears like a distant echo, but Mike doesn't care. Because while El tenses in surprise at first, half a second later, she's kissing him back, her hands coming to rest at his waist, fingers

curling into his shirt and Mike feels like he's finally home.

She rises on her toes just enough so she can kiss him with the kind of force that makes him tremble, her lips tugging at his as she presses against him, back arching to mirror the curve of his body as he leans over her (he's so much taller than she is now). Mike shivers at the feel of her pressed against him and he trails a hand from the back of her head down to the small of her back to hold her close, fingers caressing her through the fabric of her sweater, and is rewarded with the feel of her shivering, too.

Around him, like through a fog, Mike dimly hears the sounds of cheering and catcalls and applause and he knows he's making a giant scene, but he doesn't care because El's kissing him like they're the only two people in the universe and he gives as good as he gets, trading long, hard kisses that are *just not enough* to convey how much they missed each other while Mike was away.

Mike pours everything he feels, everything he *is*, into kissing El and it makes him happier than he has words for that he feels her do the same.

Eventually, after a couple of minutes, the kisses come to an end – because it's either stop kissing or *do other things* and Mike somehow has enough presence of mind to remember they're in public – and it feels like an eternity and a blink of an eye at the same time since he first kissed her, which is always how Mike feels when he's with El. He looks down at her, pleased beyond all measure to see her looking back up at him, lips swollen from his kisses, pupils blown wide, cheeks pink with a flush that splashes high across her cheekbones. Mike smiles, leaning forward to press his forehead against hers. “Hi,” he whispers.

El giggles. “Hi,” she whispers back. She spares a second to glance off to one side. “Everyone's staring at us.”

And it's true – there's still cheering and applauding and people shouting, things like “Go get her, kid!” and “Holy shit, did you see that?” But none of it matters. “I don't care, let them stare,” Mike says and means it. “I missed you.”

El smiles and leans up to give him a small peck on the lips. "I missed you, too."

"If you two lovebirds are finished, we should be going."

Max's voice pulls Mike and El out of the reverie they're in and El bites her lip as she turns in Mike's arms to face Max. "Sorry."

Max shrugs one shoulder and gives them a small smile as she tucks her skateboard under one arm. "No you're not, and you know it."

"C'mon, let's get going," Mike says, sliding his hand from the small of El's back up so he can put his arm around her shoulders. El tucks herself into the embrace as they start walking, chatting with Max who walks on the other side of El (people are still cheering and it's weird, but they all ignore it), and Mike can't help but smile.

I'm finally home.

Notes for the Chapter:

Michael "Ride or Die" Wheeler is the King of Grand Gestures and no one can convince me otherwise.

No one.

#sorrynotsorry

12. Sept - Oct 1985

Notes for the Chapter:

I don't update all the time, but when I do, they're long, effin' chapters. So long, in fact, I didn't get to half of what I wanted to get to. So, lucky you, you guys?

Warning: more teenagers being teenagers ahead, again. Also, mushiness. So much mushiness...

Sept - Oct 1985

The story of nerdy Mike Wheeler making out with the new girl El Hopper on the first day of school is the “Shot Heard Round the World” of Hawkins High. School starts on a Monday and, by Wednesday, the opening verse of the legendary love story between Mike Wheeler and El Hopper is taking shape and *everybody* knows it.

*(the story, told in awed whispers and dreamy sighs to every new kid or just to fill the time, especially if mike and el are being, well, **mike and el**, will one day go something like this: "on the first day of freshman year, mike wheeler meets el hopper and it's, like, love at first sight. mike wheeler is a huge nerd – yeah, yeah, i know he's on the varsity swim team, but he's still a huge, fucking nerd – anyway, mike wheeler is a huge nerd, **like** i was saying, and el hopper is the daughter of the police chief and super hot, so, they're from totally different worlds. doesn't matter to mike wheeler, though. he knows what he wants and he wants el hopper. so, end of the first day of school, he marches right up to her and, before she can even say anything, just kisses her in front of **everybody**. like, full on makes out with her for 10 minutes. and she is totally into it. so, yeah, mike wheeler made out with el hopper on the first day of school and they've been inseparable ever since. i was there; it was, like, the most ballsy thing i've ever seen.")*

*(of course, there's a lot they'll never know. there'll be nothing about underground government labs, or superpowered teenagers, or monsters from another dimension. they'll never know the **true** story of how mike and el fell in love, but they'll tell what they know and it'll still be pretty*

fantastic).

Mike becomes known as the guy who made out with the police chief's daughter in front of *everybody* on the first day of school and lived to tell the tale. It doesn't make him popular – he's still too much of a nerd to rise that high – but it makes him *cool* in a way he never could have imagined. For the first few weeks of school, he gets sharp chin nods and slaps on the shoulder from mostly the upperclassmen, like they respect him now, or something.

(And, completely unknown to Mike, he gets the beginning of dreamy sighs and longing looks from some of the girls in his grade because, like, the way he kissed El? Just like out of a movie or a romance novel and it's so *romantic*, and they would *love* to have a boyfriend like that and Mike Wheeler's kinda dreamy, isn't he? Like a writer or poet or something – deep and soulful and sensitive.)

And that coolness spreads to the rest of the Party (El doesn't need it, what with being the beautiful, mysterious daughter of the police chief), just enough to keep the bullies and pranksters off their backs and give them some relief as they adjust to the new school and new routine.

"Hey, do you think you could arrange to make out with El in the cafeteria around, say, the middle of October?" Dustin asks a few weeks into the school year as the male portion of the Party hangs out in the Byers' family room on a Saturday afternoon. El and Max are off doing girl things at El's house, leaving the boys on their own until the evening, when the girls will rejoin the rest of the Party for dinner.

Mike looks away from where Lucas and Will are playing "Super Mario Bros.," eyebrows arching in confusion. What is Dustin on about, this time? "Excuse me?"

"Chris McKay's Halloween party is supposed to be super awesome," Dustin says with an exuberant grin. "And, well, since making out with El seems to have made you somewhat cool, I figure a reminder couldn't hurt when Chris is thinking about who to invite to the shindig."

Mike levels a flat look at Dustin, annoyance flaring hot in his chest.

"I'm not making out with El so you can go to a party."

Dustin waves a hand at Mike with a scoff. "Oh please, it's not like I'm asking you do to something you already don't *want* to do, or anything. Just...be strategic about it."

Mike's incredulity grows even larger. How does Dustin think this is ok? "Strategic?!" Mike's aware that his voice has risen almost an octave in annoyed disbelief and he just doesn't care. "You're asking me to be *strategic* about showing affection to the *girl I love* and you think-" Mike's brain catches up with his mouth about a half second later and he bites down, lips clamping shut, and the blush that spreads across his cheeks is so hot, it must be visible from space.

With a gasp, Dustin reaches out and slaps Will on the shoulder with the back of his hand. "Guys, guys, Mike just said the L-word!"

Lucas lets out a resigned sigh and pauses the game. "Like we didn't *know* that, Dustin. *Everyone* knows how Mike feels about El. You'd have to be blind and deaf not to know. Hell, you'd probably still know even if you were blind and deaf." Lucas turns to look at Mike. "Sorry, no offense, man, but you're not exactly subtle." Mike's still too embarrassed and shocked at what just came out of his mouth to respond with words, but he still manages to shoot a betrayed look over at Lucas.

"Guys, I think this is the first time he's said it out loud," Will says, a small, sympathetic smile on his face. He's put down his controller and is facing Mike fully. "Mike, have you told El that you love her?"

Mike gulps, anxiety making his skin feel tight and palms clammy. Because he hasn't told El that he loves her, not yet. The words are always on the tip of his tongue, but they're not ready to come out yet and Mike doesn't know *why*. "No?" The word comes out as a desperate squeak and Mike kinda wants to crawl into a hole and die.

Lucas raises both eyebrows. "Are you asking us or telling us?"

Mike coughs to clear his throat. "I mean, I haven't said the words yet, but, I've told her...*things*." He pauses, a sinking feeling of dread crawling up to take residence in his stomach. "Does she know, do you

think?" he asks, looking down at his lap and picking absently at the fabric of his jeans.

Will chuckles. "Well, El has some pretty cool powers, but I don't think mind reading is one of them." Will pauses, glancing up towards the ceiling as he considers something for half a second. "At least, not yet, at any rate." He looks back at Mike. "Point is, El might not know that you love her, but she knows you care about her. You treat her like she's the most perfect girl in the world."

"Because she is," Mike interrupts, muttering the words under his breath, but still loud enough so *everyone* hears him.

"Exactly," Will says, rolling with the interruption. "But you don't need to tell her if you're not ready."

The anxiety mixes with the fear nestled inside of him and Mike feels slightly nauseated. "But, what if I tell her and it's the wrong moment? What if she doesn't feel the same? Or, worse, what if she says it back because she thinks she has to? I mean, she spent 12 years in a government lab. There's a lot she hasn't gotten to experience and-

"Dude," Dustin cuts in, stopping Mike before he can launch into a full-on panic attack. "El's not trapped with you." Mike gulps and looks at Dustin as the other boy smiles, the expression gentle and concerned. "She's with you because she wants to be."

"El loves you, Mike," Will says.

The words are like a shock to Mike's whole system. "How do you know?"

"Man, she looks at you like you look at her," Lucas says. "The way you two feel about each other is like an immutable law of the universe, or something." Mike finds the way Lucas words that to be comforting beyond measure and he feels his anxiety lessen just enough so he can breathe again.

"And Mike?" Dustin says, forcing Mike's attention on him. "When the moment's right, you'll know. Don't overthink it. Just mean it when you say it and you'll be fine."

The conversation about love and El that Mike has with the guys sits with him and knocks him a half degree of kilter (he's hyper-aware of his feelings for El, torn between wanting to tell her that he loves her and not wanting to put her in an awkward spot), but otherwise, he settles into the high school routine with the rest of the Party.

Because it's Mike and El, they practically live out of each other's lockers and backpacks, each of them having the other's combination to the former and equal free reign of the latter. Mike will open his locker to find small, hand-drawn notes covered in patterned decorations and small hearts, with Hershey's Kisses taped on top. He often returns the favor with small flowers and notes that consist of random combinations of poetry, memories he has of her and the two of them, and other sentiments he wants to pass on.

And, because, of course they do, the rest of the Party teases them *endlessly*.

("Seriously, *please* go find a supply closet and make out to get it of your systems," Max says one day in early October during lunch period.

"Already did that today," El says, giggling as Mike wraps his arms around her from behind, a stupid, satisfied grin on his face, and leans down to press a kiss just below her ear that has her giggle turning into squealing laughter.

"What? When?"

"Before Study Hall," El says. "It's why we were late."

Dustin gasps, looking almost scandalized. "I thought you two looked like you were up to no good.")

Of course, there are things that change that routine; things like sports and electives and whatnot. Somehow, the PE teacher convinces Mike and Lucas to join Cross Country...well, with Mike, it was really the

Swim team by way of the Cross Country team. (“Kid, we could use someone with your height on the Swim team in the spring. Go ahead and sign up for Cross Country.” – “Cross country, sir?” – “For conditioning, Wheeler.”) Mike’s actually ok with the arrangement, much to his surprise; it gets him out of having to do PE, which he hates. And running’s not so bad; at least it doesn’t require him to have good eye-hand coordination and being able to run might come in handy (it only takes one run-in with a demon from another dimension, never mind all the other times, to convince Mike of the value of being quick on his feet).

The rest of the Party find their own extracurriculars, too: Will and Max both end up in Art and Shop, El lands in Dance and Choir, and Dustin finds what seems to be a natural home in Drama. And, of course, they all join A/V club...well, more like *form* A/V club since there is no such thing at Hawkins High (or, there isn’t at the moment and, if there ever was, all the evidence of it is long gone).

So, high school settles into a rhythm, punctuated by the Party hanging out as often as they can and Mike and El (as well as Max and Lucas) finding what time they can to themselves from the free time that remains.

All in all, it’s going well – *really* well. In fact, despite the anxiety that creeps up Mike’s spine every time he thinks about telling El that he loves her (and, really, he’s not scared of saying it; he’s scared of how she’ll react because he wants everything to be perfect, because he wants her to say it back and *mean* it), he decides that it’s time to introduce El to his parents as his girlfriend.

So, one night at dinner in the middle of October, Mike sets down his silverware and clears his throat. “Mom, Dad? I have something I wanted to tell you.” Out of the corner of his eye, Mike can see Nancy looking at him curiously, but he ignores her; if he looks at her, he’ll lose his nerve.

Mike’s mom wipes her mouth with her napkin and sets it back down across her lap with a smile. “Sweetie, you know you can tell us anything,” she says.”

Mike gulps and nods. He takes in a deep breath. “I have a girlfriend.”

Next to him, Nancy inhales the water she was sipping and immediately begins coughing.

“What?” Mike’s mom says; her mouth’s open. “Nancy, is this true?”

Mike looks over at Nancy as she fans her hand in front of her face to cool off the flush that the coughing brought on. “Oh, yes,” Nancy says. “It’s quite true.” There’s an amused, but affectionate smile that crosses Nancy’s face and Mike knows it’s because Nancy loves El (he loves that his sister loves his girlfriend and can’t even begin to explain why).

Mike’s dad smiles. “Good job, son.”

Mike looks at his dad and can feel his face contort with incredulity. Say what, now? Holy shit, did he really come from this man? To be fair, his dad’s been weirdly proud since Mike came home and said he was joining the Cross Country team, so Mike’s coming to the conclusion that his dad’s got fucked up priorities. Still, though.... ‘Good job?’ he mouths before rolling his eyes with a shake of his head and looking back at his mom. “That’s wonderful, honey,” Mike’s mom says with a soft smile. “Do we know her?”

This question, for some reason, makes Mike blush. “Oh, yeah, um, it’s El Hopper. You remember El, right?”

“Chief Hopper’s daughter? Oh, she’s a lovely girl, Mike,” Mike’s mom sighs. “Why don’t you invite her over for dinner tomorrow?”

Next to him, Nancy sniggers into her food and Mike’s foot snaps out to kick her in the shin. “But, Mom, we’re all getting together at Will’s house tomorrow to work on homework; El and I have an essay due in English that we need to work on.”

But, Mike’s mom shoots him her normal, exasperated look and Mike knows he’s going to give in. “Well, you can just work on it here, Michael. It’s not like there’s not plenty of room in this house for homework.”

So, the next day, El and Mike are in the basement of the Wheeler house, sitting next to each other on the couch with open notebooks on their laps and copies of “The Odyssey” sitting on the cushion between them.

Out of the corner of her eye, El glances over at Mike, unease sitting heavy in her stomach. But it’s not nerves about having dinner with Mike’s parents – from the few times she’s met Mrs. Wheeler, El knows that the older woman is kind and concerned (Mike’s dad is useless, though and El really has no patience for him).

No, this is something different. For the past few weeks, every so often, El will catch Mike staring at her with the weirdest expression on his face, but only if he doesn’t think she’s looking. And it’s a look she hasn’t been able to decipher, a strange mix of sad, anxious, and caring. It’s been bothering El, but she hasn’t figured out how to bring it up. And, when she does get determined to say something, Mike does such a wonderful job distracting her by just being him that she forgets until after they’re apart.

It’s clear he’s unsettled about something, but doesn’t want to come to her with it just yet. El wants to give Mike the space to come to her with what’s been bothering him. But she’s getting worried and has no idea what to do about it. Should she push him about it? And, if so, *when*?

(Maybe she should give him her surprise now, to help make him feel better, instead of waiting until their nightly, bedtime conversations, but El stops herself, knowing she’s been working on figuring this surprise out for *weeks* and doesn’t want to ruin the impact of the gift she has for him. It can wait until later.)

With a shake of her head, resolving to think of it later, El lets out a silent sigh and refocuses her attention on the outline for her essay.

A few minutes pass and Mike’s voice pulls her from her focus. “Hey, El?”

El looks up from her work and immediately notes the anxious look on Mike’s face; she hates how the expression mars the beauty of his face.

“Yeah, Mike?”

Mike sets aside his notebook and turns to face her, one leg folded between them while the other hangs off the couch. El finds herself mirroring the posture (carefully, as she’s wearing a skirt) and she watches as Mike bites down on his lower lip for a brief moment before his tongue flicks out to lick at his lips. He’s nervous – like, *really* nervous. But, before El can call him out on it, Mike draws in a deep breath and looks her in the eye. “El, are you happy?”

El blinks a few times in rapid succession. What? “Mike, what’s this about?” She is so confused right now.

Mike sighs and glances away. He’s not just nervous, El notes – he’s *scared*. “I just...wanted to make sure you were happy. With everything.” His gaze flicks to her, meeting her in the eye for half a second before looking away again. “You haven’t had a lot of choices in life and, well...” Mike trails off with a half shrug.

If El had to be certain of one thing in her short, limited life, it would be this: she knows Mike Wheeler better than anyone in the world. She understands him like she understands herself. And it hits her, with sudden clarity, where this is coming from. “Mike, look at me, *please*.” Mike looks up at her through his impossibly beautiful eyelashes, but doesn’t raise his head more than a few inches. Not good enough.

El picks up the books that sit between her and Mike and sets them on the ground so she can scoot forward. Wordlessly, El arranges herself so that she’s sitting across Mike’s lap, her knee-length skirt draping over both their legs, her body twisted at the hips so her torso’s facing him almost completely. As if from reflex, Mike wraps his arms loosely around her waist and El can’t help the small shiver that runs through her as she feels his thumb mindlessly caress her hip through her skirt, his fingers resting just under the hem of her sweater.

At this distance, it’s easy for El to reach for Mike’s face and tip his head up so she can look him straight in the eye. Her breath catches in her throat as she does, though – he’s just so *pretty*, all high cheekbones and dark eyes and splashes of freckles whose patterns beg for her finger to trace. But, El knows there’s a time and a place for all

things and now's not the time to stare mooningly at her boyfriend. Because the look in Mike's eyes is both sad and worried and it hurts El's heart to see. "Mike," she says, voice quiet and gentle. "I'm happy, so very happy. You help make me very happy."

Mike's eyes widen a fraction and El knows she's hit on the source of Mike's mood. He sighs and glances down, but El's fingers under his chin keeps his head from dipping. "But, you don't know if someone could make you happier." The words are more breathed than spoken and they hit El like a stab to the heart.

Heart pounding, El takes Mike's face in both hands, her thumbs caressing his cheeks. "Mike, please, look at me." His gaze meets hers once more and El smiles. "There's no one who could make me happier. You *saved* me, Mike. You save me every day. With the way you make me laugh, the way you hold me and care for me, the way you watch out for me and teach me and just *be* with me. I know there are other people out there, but no one knows me the way you do. I don't *want* anyone to know me the way you do. I just want you, Mike."

The beginning of a smile tug at the corners of Mike's lips and El feels like they've turned a corner. "Yeah?"

"Always," El says. "I'm always going to want to be with you, Mike Wheeler." She leans forward and presses a soft kiss to Mike's forehead. Her lips linger and Mike sighs, the exhale of his breath brushing against her collarbone and sternum. Inspired by sheer volume of love she feels for the boy in front of her, El moves her lips from Mike's forehead to the top of his cheekbone, right beneath the corner of his right eye. El breathes in the scent of him – the smell of his shampoo, of the laundry detergent his mom uses, and something else that is so fundamentally *Mike* – and she feels more than hears the sharp intake of breath that Mike breathes in.

Tipping Mike's face, El glides her lips down his cheekbone, pressing light kisses along the length of the bone, his skin soft and warm beneath her lips. Her heart pounds in her chest, blood racing, her head feeling light – she never wants to stop. They're both breathing hard by the time El presses her lips to the corner of Mike's mouth. "El," Mike whispers, almost desperate.

El gasps and pulls away just enough to look Mike in the eye and it's like the whole world stops as they lose themselves in each other. His gaze bores into her and it's like he's looking for something. But El has nothing to hide, so she lets him in, letting him see everything she has to offer. Because it's his; it's *all* his.

Mike lets out a breath that it somewhere between a sigh and a sob and El can't hold herself back anymore. She leans forward, lips parted, eyes slipping shut, and captures Mike's mouth with her own. Mike sucks in a sharp gasp, mouth parting just enough so El can trap his lower lip between hers, tugging on it gently. Then Mike angles his head so he can kiss her back – lips firm and full against her own, the heat from his body engulfing her – and it's like El forgets her own name, she's so overwhelmed by him.

They trade soft, deep kisses for a handful of minutes, luxuriating in the feel of each other. There're no other sounds besides their breathing and the whisper of their lips gliding against each other, punctuated every once in a while by a sigh or a gasp.

But, as it always happens with the two of them, things turn into *more*. Needing to touch more of him, El's hands trail up Mike's cheeks, her fingers weaving into thick strands of black hair. She scrapes her fingernails lightly against Mike's scalp and is rewarded with a gasp, his grip on her hips tightening before moving up towards her waist, fingers sneaking further up under the hem of her sweater.

El shivers at the feel of Mike's hands on her waist, his touch warm through the thin fabric of her skirt and El shifts in his embrace, trying to chase the shiver, kissing him all the harder. The move slides Mike's fingers even further up her waist, his touch landing on the bare skin just above top of her skirt, causing them both to gasp and groan.

Mike pulls back, ending the kiss, and El whimpers at the loss of Mike's lips against hers. "El, is this ok?" he asks, voice low and raspy in the way that always sends a shiver down El's spine. The feel of his hands on her bare skin have robbed her of the ability to form words – every inch of her feels warm and tingly in a way she never wants to end – so she nods her assent.

And when Mike kisses her again, it's all devouring heat and

breathless abandon, his mouth hard on hers. El opens her mouth against the onslaught of his kisses, her tongue flicking out to brush against his lips. Mike groans against her mouth at the sensation and returns the favor and – *oh, Max was right. That **does** feel good.*

Mike's fingertips start to draw random patterns along the curve of her waist and the small of her back and El can't help the way she arches into him, desperate to get closer, her hands working in his hair to anchor her to *something*. There will *never* be such a thing as "close enough" with them, not with the way he's pressed against her from shoulder to stomach; or the way he kisses her, hard and desperate.

Mike drags his mouth from hers and ducks his head to press his lips to the line of her jaw, the start of a dizzying trail that leads up to her ear and down the length of her neck, while his fingers inch ever higher up the skin of her torso. El can't catch her breath and she's panting against him and every few exhales comes out in a whimpering moan. Her fingers tighten in his hair, asking him, *begging* him, to never stop. The sweater she's wearing is a V-neck and exposes the sweep of her collarbones and Mike lets out another groan against her skin as El tilts her head back so he can press soft, suckling kisses along one collarbone and then the other. Every place he touches her feels like it's on fire and, God, she never wants him to stop.

Mike's fingers brush along the bottom curve of her ribcage and she gasps, her heart pounding in her chest so hard, she wouldn't be surprised if Mike can *feel* it and maybe, *just maybe*, this would be better if she weren't wearing her sweater and-

"Mike, it's time for dinner!"

In an instant, Mike and El snap their heads back to look each other in the eye before both of them look at the top of the basement stairs. The open doorway is empty, but El feels an embarrassed flush mix with the already overheated skin of her face and chest at the thought of Mrs. Wheeler catching them like this – not that there's anything wrong with what they were doing, El just doesn't think his mom wants to see them like this.

"Be up in a minute, Mom!" Mike calls back, his voice only a little unsteady. His hands move back down El's torso to rest on her clothed

hips and El pouts just a little. Mike laughs at her. “What’s that look for?”

“Liked your hands where they were,” El says, already missing the heat of his touch on her skin.

Mike lets out a tortured groan and his head falls forward so his forehead rests on her shoulder; El lets her fingers slip from his hair, her hands clasping behind his neck. “Jesus, El, you’re gonna be the death of me, you know that?”

El’s doesn’t like the sound of that phrase, but she knows Mike doesn’t mean it literally and thinks she understands the sentiment behind it. “Not my fault you have magic hands.”

At that, Mike chuckles, raising his head to look back at her. His hair is sticking every which way and El feels pride at her handiwork. “Magic hands, huh?” he says around a goofy smile, lips still swollen from their kisses.

El giggles. “Yeah. You look like you’ve been very well kissed, you know,” she says, one hand coming around so she can run a finger across his lips.

Mike leans forward and El moves her hand aside so he can press a quick kiss against her mouth. “Like you’re any better,” he says, smiling all the while. “C’mon, let’s go upstairs. If we wait too long, Mom’ll catch us like this.” It takes them a few moments to carefully dis-entangle, mostly to keep her skirt from doing anything too inappropriate, and then Mike grabs her hand and smiles. “Ready?”

El smiles back. “Always.”

The first time Karen Wheeler meets El Hopper is at her annual 4th of July party. She’d heard all the rumors of Jim Hopper’s new daughter – news travels fast around Hawkins, *especially* if it’s a little salacious – and when Mike asks her if El and Jim can come to the 4th of July

party with all of his other friends, Karen is more than a little surprised.

“I didn’t think you knew the Chief’s daughter, Mike,” Karen says. How would Mike have met the girl all of Hawkins is talking about in hushed whispers?

Her son blushes – embarrassed at being caught hiding something, maybe? – and stammers a bit as he explains. “Well, Chief Hopper and Mrs. Byers are friends, so he’s been bringing El-”

“I thought her name was Jane?” Karen asks.

At the interruption, Mike heaves a sigh that is just so very teenaged boy and absolutely, 100% *him*, it almost makes Karen smile. “El’s a nickname,” he says. “Anyway, the Chief’s been bringing El by Will’s house to make friends before school, so the Party’s been hanging out with her, showing her around Hawkins, and, well, she’s pretty cool. So, can Hopper and El come on the 4th?”

Karen smiles; she’s so glad Mike’s growing into a considerate young man, helping the girl feel welcome to Hawkins. She’s heard horror stories about some of the other kids in Mike’s grade (and older) and is so happy that her son isn’t turning into something like *that*. “Of course, pass on the invite and I’ll make sure there’s room for them.”

Then Karen meets El and, though something about the girl’s face tugs on *something* in the back of Karen’s mind, Karen finds El to be a beautiful, sweet girl. She brings Karen a small bouquet of flowers that she hands over after Karen lets Jim and El in the house and lets out a soft, “Thank you for inviting us, Mrs. Wheeler,” that just melts Karen’s heart.

“Thank you, sweetie,” Karen says, holding on to the flowers, before she shoots an approving glance over at Jim. “Very polite.”

Jim looks a little awkward, standing in the foyer wearing jeans and a thin flannel, but he smiles and shrugs. “Does that all on her own, I’m afraid. Thanks for having us, Karen.”

The quiet is ruined when Mike and all of his friends come barreling

up from the basement. “El, you’re here!” Mike exclaims.

“We thought we heard you come in,” Dustin follows up. “C’mon, you’ve got to see what Will made-”

“It’s not that special, guys,” Will interrupts.

“That’s bull, Will, and you know it,” Dustin says, blushing as he looks at Karen. “Sorry, Mrs. Wheeler.”

But, Karen’s feeling generous and waves off the language. “It’s ok, Dustin. Mike, why don’t you and your friends show El around the house before you resume playing your games in the basement?”

There’s something almost...amused about the look on Mike’s face, but he just smiles. “Ok, Mom. Guys, let’s give El the tour.”

“Oh, yeah, we’ll give her the tour,” Lucas says and all the kids, including El, giggle at Lucas’ words. Karen feels like she’s walked in on something private and doesn’t understand how it happened – and in her own house, nonetheless.

“Alright, guys, go on,” Jim says, somehow both fond and unyielding, and, like magic, all 5 of them immediately run off, obeying Jim’s words without question.

And as the day goes on, Karen watches this new girl, Jim’s new daughter, and can’t help but notice the way Mike glances at her, shy and adoring, and how he goes out of his way to make sure she has whatever she needs and Karen’s heart gives a strange squeeze in her chest as she realizes what’s going on. God, her little boy has a crush and it’s just so *adorable*.

El becomes a somewhat regular fixture at the house the rest of the summer and beyond, becoming a member of Mike’s group of friends along with the other girl, Max, and is always over whenever all of Mike’s friends have congregated at the Wheelers’. Karen always has to hold back giggles when she watches Mike try not to fall over himself to be a good host for El and it’s only striking because he doesn’t extend the behavior to anyone else. But Karen also doesn’t miss the way El looks at her son, all small smiles and shining eyes

and *looks like Mike's not the only one with a crush*, Karen thinks.

Karen finds herself liking El Hopper. El always has a kind word to say to her when she comes over, always thanking Karen for letting her over or complimenting the food Karen makes for whatever meal Mike and his friends are over at the house for, or helping to clean up after dinner (something none of Mike or his other friends have ever really offered).

And, when no one thinks Karen is looking, she watches as Mike and El talk, even if they're surrounded by their friends, and Karen can't help but notice the way the two interact, El hanging off every word that Mike says, listening – really *listening* – to him in a way that Karen thinks no one ever has. El doesn't say much back, but it's clear that Mike treasures every word she gives him and the whole thing just warms Karen's heart. And, not that it matters at all, El Hopper is a very beautiful young woman and when she adds in everything else, Karen can so easily see why her son has a crush on the police chief's daughter.

So, when Mike tells everyone over dinner that he has a girlfriend and that it's El Hopper, Karen almost wants to jump out of her chair, she's so happy. Instead, she insists that Mike invite El over for dinner the following night, reasoning through Mike's excuses about homework and takes the small victory when Mike gives in.

El and Mike arrive at the house after school the next day and Karen smiles when El greets her, dressed in a soft blue sweater and a modest, knee-length skirt. "Thank you for inviting me for dinner, Mrs. Wheeler."

"Oh, it's no problem, El. We're just happy to have you over and to meet you as Mike's girlfriend."

"Ugh, *Mom*," Mike groans with a dramatic eye roll.

Karen smiles as she and El share an amused look and Karen finds herself growing fonder of El with each passing minute. "Alright, go and work on your homework," Karen says. "I'll call you when dinner's ready."

“*Thank* you,” Mike says, heaving a sigh, and he reaches out to grab El’s hand. “C’mon, El, let’s go work on our essays.” El follows behind with a small wave for Karen and Karen doesn’t think much about it when Mike and El go down into the basement.

She almost regrets that, though, when she calls out to Mike that dinner’s ready and the two come up from the basement a minute later. Karen purses her lips at the sight of Mike’s messy hair and the flushes on both of their cheeks. Their clothes are all in the right places, but there are obvious signs all over their faces that they’ve been kissing. But, since nothing else seems too amiss, Karen decides to say nothing for the moment – *Going to need to have a talk with Michael about appropriate boundaries.*

Instead, Nancy does it for her. “Geez, Mike, go fix your hair,” Karen overhears Nancy say. “It’s *super* obvious you two were making out in the basement.”

“*Nancy*,” Mike hisses and frantically tries to tame his hair.

Nancy smiles and walks over to give El a one-sided hug, which El returns. “Hi, El.”

“Hi, Nancy. Where should I sit?” The interaction catches Karen a little off guard; she didn’t know El and Nancy were close enough to give each other hugs.

“Here, next to Mike,” Nancy says, guiding El to the empty seat at the end of the table.

And then dinner starts and Karen tries her best to manage the conversation around the table as she makes sure Holly eats her vegetables, but she mainly watches as Nancy, El, and Mike talk about things related to school. Karen interjects every so often and tries to deflect the awkward comments Ted makes (she also tries to keep herself from being disappointed in her husband, but that ship sailed long ago and port’s years behind them).

But, everyone survives and, when Jim arrives to pick up El, Karen can’t help but spy on her son as he says goodbye to his girlfriend.

Jim's waiting in his car and El and Mike are standing in the foyer. "I'm sorry about my dad," Mike says and Karen wishes his voice didn't sound so sad. "I can't believe he brought up that time I tried out for the soccer team in 2nd grade and got hit in the face with the ball." Karen cringes in at the memory of Ted bringing that up, remembering the crestfallen look on her son's face, the way he blushed and how Nancy and El had looked at each other awkwardly, and it looks like she's also going to need to have a talk with the other man in her life about a different kind of appropriate boundaries.

"It's ok, Mike," El says, her hand coming out to wrap around Mike's elbow; her expression is soft and sympathetic and Karen is grateful that this girl has a heart big enough to wrap her son in and keep him safe. "I don't think your dad means to make you feel this way."

Mike looks down and shrugs one shoulder. "Yeah, but no one else should have to experience that. I just...wanted tonight to go well."

El smiles. "It was fine, Mike. Thanks for asking me over. It was nice."

Mike lifts his head and looks down at El. "Yeah?" It sounds to Karen a little like Mike's smiling, but his face is angled away just enough that she can't see the look on his face.

"Yeah, Mike. I'm happy."

"Promise?" Karen's heart twists in her chest and she tries not to make a sound despite the gasp that builds in her throat, tries not to let the two know she's nearby. But Mike sounds so desperately hopeful, like his very being relies on how El answers.

"Promise," El returns, the word sounding heavy with a weight Karen can't even begin to guess at. El then raises up on her toes while Mike takes her face in his hands and leans down to give her a sweet kiss. Karen feels like a voyeur, but there's something so very touching about how the two kiss and hold each other and it warms Karen in a way she never expected. Her son has a girlfriend who cares for him as much as he cares for her and it's more than she could have ever hoped for.

Then, El leaves and Karen sighs. Right, time to have that talk about

appropriate boundaries...

Pangs of embarrassment still ripple across Mike's skin as he crawls into bed, dressed in plaid PJ pants and a white t-shirt, and he's trying so very hard to block the conversation he just had with his mom out of his head.

"No more spending time alone in the basement and if you two are in your room, the door stays open *at all times*. I remember what it's like to be a teenager, Michael, and I'm not ready to become a grandmother yet," his mom had said and Mike just nodded along, even though he wanted to *die on the spot*.

But then memories of him and El in the basement flood into his mind and, well, Mike can maybe understand where his mom is coming from. Because now all he can think of is the silky soft warmth of El's bare torso beneath his palms and the taste of her neck on his lips and tongue and the sounds she made as he kissed and touched her, all sighs and moans and whimpers. And Mike knows without a doubt that he wants to touch El like that again and then keep going. Mike wants in a way that feels endless when it comes to El and he wonders what would have happened if his mom hadn't interrupted them with dinner, how far they would have gone...if they would have done *that*.

But then a dizzying wave of panic mixes with the desire Mike feels and he knows they wouldn't have. Because he is so not ready on a mental level for that step; because he hasn't even told her that he loves her; because he's only 14 and there's still so much he doesn't know, so much he wants to learn and prepare for.

*(it won't stop him from dreaming about her like that, won't stop him from thinking about **that** with her, but it's enough for now and someday, it won't be and he'll be ready and hopefully she'll be ready and that thought is so overwhelming, mike is glad he's lying down because his knees feel weak.)*

He lays in bed and feels the beginning of sleep pull at him. But before

he goes under, El calls out to him. *Mike.*

Mike's eyes shoot open, suddenly awake. This is his new favorite thing. Because a couple of weeks ago, he and El discovered that they could talk at a distance just with their thoughts, using her powers as a conduit. And it's *awesome*, knowing that they can talk at anytime, anywhere, no matter the distance between them, the reassurance that they'll never be separated without a way to communicate. *El, you're here.*

Of course I am, she says, as if it could be no other way. Mike feels the phantom sensation of her fingers on his forehead; he sighs at her touch, even at a distance. *Close your eyes. There's something I want to show you.*

Curiosity bubbles under Mike's skin and he smiles. *What is it?*

Mike hears El's giggle in his head – all light and soft and so fucking cute. *Close your eyes*, she repeats in admonishment.

Mike does as she asks and feels the smile on his face threaten to grow wider with each passing second. *Ok, now what?*

Try and keep your head empty. Focus on my voice. This might feel... weird. Mike's so focused on following El's directions that it takes him a second to process the last part of her words and, before he can even think to question *what* might feel weird, a strange, dizzying sensation flows over him, like going over the drop of a roller coaster, all swooping stomach and wind rushing past him. The sensation shocks Mike's eyes open and he sits up, gasping as he does so. Because El's in front of him, wearing an oversized t-shirt and thin, sleep shorts, and he's in his bedroom, but it's also not his bedroom.

Blackness stretches for as far as the eye can see and the only objects anywhere around are him, El, and the corner of his room that has his bed and his nightstand. Everything is washed in a weak, blue-white light and – *is that water?*

"Hi, Mike," El says, smiling shyly, her tone slow and comforting, like she knows he's going to need it.

“What...what is this?” Mike asks, twisting around to try and take it all in. Something deep inside of him shrivels in fear at the sheer amount of *nothing* around them, but El doesn’t look scared at all and it helps.

“This is the Void,” El says.

Mike’s eyes widen in surprise and he’s just blown away by how powerful El is. How...? “Am I really here?”

El sits next to him and Mike feels the mattress dip with her weight. “Just as much I’m really here,” El says. “In reality, we’re both still laying in our own beds. If you focus, you should be able to feel your real body back where it is.” And Mike finds that, yes, if he thinks just hard enough, he can feel himself still lying in bed. But the touch of El’s hand on his forearm brings him back to the present moment; it tingles a bit, like there’s a thin force field between them or something – a reminder of how they’re physically not there – but he can *feel* her like she’s really there and *oh, god, this is going to be so dangerous.*

But, El’s looking up at him like she looked at him earlier when they were in his basement, eyes full of affection and trust and giving, a soft smile on her face, and all his concerns fly out the window; the way she’s looking at him is enough to make his heart race. “I just... now it’s not just talking; we can see each other whenever we want, no matter where we are. I know you get sad like I do when we don’t see each other and I wanted to give you something, something to make you happy like you make me happy.”

Mike’s heart skips a few beats and he just can’t, it’s too much. He leans forward, one hand coming up to cup the side of El’s head, fingers tangling in her hair like it’s where they’ve always belonged, and he kisses her. Mike will never get enough of kissing her, will never tire of feeling her lips against his, and he’s smiling even though his mouth is pressed against hers, but he’s just so fucking happy. He pulls back and touches his forehead to hers, their breaths mingling with the closeness, his fingers still in her hair, massaging her scalp with soft, gentle motions. “I love you,” he says with hushed reverence, unable to keep the words back anymore. They slip from his lips with ease, an exhale of a breath he’s been holding for almost two years, and his heart feels light for having said them out loud.

“God, I love you so much.”

It helps that El’s looking up at him, a bright smile on her face, eyes shining. Her hands wrap around his upper arms, just above his elbows, her fingers curling into him while her thumbs caress his biceps. “I love you, too,” she says. “It feels like I’ve always loved you.” And then they’re both smiling, hands clutching each other, never wanting to let go, and Mike lets out a laugh that is almost a sob, but he doesn’t care because he’s so happy, because she loves him too and it feels like his heart’s going to burst out of his chest. And then they’re kissing, giggling all the while, and Mike tastes tears on both of their lips, but they’re happy tears. Both of them are crying a little, and it doesn’t matter because they’re together, because they love each other, and that’s all they need.

Elation fades in to exhaustion and Mike feels El pushing on his chest, her mouth breaking away from his. “Lie down,” she says and, when he does, she pulls the covers back and crawls underneath them. Wordlessly, Mike lifts an arm and El snuggles into his side, her head on his shoulder, her hand on his chest.

Mike wraps his arm around her and holds her close. “You’ll be gone in the morning, won’t you?” he asks, voice drowsy. He thinks back to the few times he’s woken up next to her – the day after they were reunited and during Memorial Day weekend – and he misses it, misses the feel of waking up with her in his arms, all warm and soft and *his*.

“Yeah,” El says, sounding as sad about it as Mike feels. “But, this is better than before; now we can actually feel each other.”

“True,” Mike murmurs. He presses a kiss to the top of her head and sighs. “Night, El. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Aww, they said "I love you"! tbh, surprised me a bit, too; had it planned for later in the story but it felt right and I had to do it. And Mike's just one big ball

of anxiety, always worried about the people he cares about. *smooshes him* poor bby. At least he has El who loves him just as much as he loves her.

Up next: The Parent Trap: Stranger Things Edition
rubs hands together mwahahaha...

13. Oct - Nov 1985

Notes for the Chapter:

So, this is my New Year's gift to you all! It's an uber-chapter!

Seriously, this monster clocks in at just shy of 10k words.

And apologies in advance for anything that's weird and misspelled; I've had a lot of champagne today.

Happy New Year!

Oct - Nov 1985

If the Party thinks Mike and El are obnoxious before saying “I love you” to each other, they are downright *intolerable* after doing so. Mike and El’s joint ability to turn any moment into a PDA moment just ups its own game and they are so literally *all over each other*, it’s almost sickening.

“Oh my *god*,” Dustin groans. It’s the day before Halloween and the Party is hanging out at one of the outdoor tables at the diner by the arcade, grabbing a quick bite to eat before heading over to tackle the digital battlefields. Only, Mike and El are sitting at the end of one of the benches, food all but forgotten as El sits across Mike’s lap, their mouths meeting over and over in long, soft kisses. “Do they ever stop?” Dustin laments.

“Face it, Dustin,” Will says. “World War 3 could explode right here in Hawkins and Mike and El would still be making out.”

Mike reaches out with a hand, flipping them off, lips never leaving El’s, while El giggles through the kisses.

Dustin looks over to Max and Lucas for some sort of moral support and backup, but finds *them* attached at the lips as well, and lets out a frustrated sigh. “Oh, *come on!*”

El knows the eye rolls and groans it triggers in the others whenever they catch her and Mike kissing, but she just doesn't care. She's way too happy to care. Mike *loves* her. And she loves him so much, she can barely contain the volume of her feelings. Sometimes, kissing Mike is the only way to keep from exploding out of her skin with the sheer amount of love she feels for him.

And now that the depth of their feelings are out in the open, everything is so much *more*. Their looks linger that much longer, their touches are that much more electrifying, and their kisses – *oh god*, their kisses. Kissing Mike now is so much *richer* than it was before: her heart beats faster, her skin feels hotter, and she feels too small for all the emotions that blossom inside of her at the touch of his lips to hers, all the love and comfort and happiness and excitement and desire that mix together and make her feel like the whole world is within her grasp.

It's so close to perfect, that El can barely imagine it being anything but.

Nothing's perfect, though. In fact, there's still a lot that's *not* perfect.

The whole, extended Party lives with the trauma of the experiences of the past 2 years – and, for El, of her whole life – and it never goes away, not all the way. It's not as sharp as in the days immediately after – all heart-racing terror and imaginary shadows that flicker out of the corners of their eyes and steal the breath from their lungs – but it lingers, weaves into their DNA, becomes a part of them that they carry every day. It shows in the way they jump at things that appear suddenly from around a corner, or the way they gasp, heart racing, at

sudden, loud noises or a dog's growl. It shows in nightmares, dreams filled with monsters and heart-pounding chases and icy darkness, waking up in cold sweats with quiet tears pooling behind closed eyelids.

The Party finds solace in each other. They all wear scars of their experience like badges of honor and cloak themselves in the bonds that come from shared experiences. They watch out for each other, comfort each other, trading hugs freely, snuggling and cuddling without care for who might be watching – especially when things get bad, when someone has a bad reaction to something that triggers a memory or has bags under their eyes from nights filled with bad dreams.

With the approach of both the second anniversary of Will's disappearance and the first anniversary of the ordeal with the Mind Flayer, and everything that went with it, the trauma is that much closer to the surface and the touches, the hugs, the snuggles, are even freer, like they all take comfort in giving as well as receiving, like they need to be close to each other just for the reassurance that they're alive, that they made it through, that they're still here and surviving.

El knows there's not a day that goes by where she isn't hugged at least three times by each member of the Party and she spends so much time snuggled up with Mike whenever they have the opportunity that she's amazed they haven't permanently fused together.

So, no, everything's not perfect. But some things stand out more than others...

There's a lot of things El still needs to learn, a lot of things she doesn't know. The subtleties of the English language still give her pause, idioms and turns of phrase mostly go over her head – although she's learning, she's lacking the years of social conversation the others have under their belts, and cultural context was not something

she had exposure to in the lab – and the whole concept of talking around things just makes no sense to her. Like, why don't people just say what they mean?

Yes, there's a lot that El still needs to learn. But that doesn't mean she's stupid. Not by a long shot.

El watches and learns. And she sees *so much*.

Mike has a nervous habit of jiggling his leg when he's anxious or impatient; and his hands always tremble a little when they kiss, out of nerves or excitement or both. And he deflects so smoothly when she asks him anything related to how his parents are or how things at home are going so he doesn't have to lie, but he also doesn't have to answer, either (which tells El everything she needs to know and she wishes she could sit Mike's parents down and tell them what their dysfunctional relationship is doing to their son).

Dustin always takes a few deep breaths before walking into French class, where he sits next to Cindy Dutra and tries to play it cool; and he always makes sure he has an extra snack or dessert to give to Will ("My mom always packs extra, don't know why." – *everybody knows this is a lie, but no one ever says anything about it*).

Will, when he thinks no one's watching, lets his shoulders slump, brave posture dropped out of exhaustion of wearing the mask at all times; but his eyes light up whenever he sees Greg Niebank, the wide receiver on the varsity football team and a junior (El doesn't know why exactly, yet, but she has her suspicions).

Lucas is often the point person of the group, especially when Max is there, and he holds her hand tight, guiding them forward, the first line of offense and defense for whatever comes their way; and though he grumbles about it, El knows he loves it when she asks him for piggyback rides since he's the strongest of the Party – she can tell from the silent laughter that shakes in his torso and the quick way he kneels down so El can hop onto his back and the way his arms hold tight against his body to keep her legs secure, not wanting to drop her, and especially the way he teases Mike about carrying his girlfriend ("Jealous, Wheeler? Got your girl's legs around me." – "Keep dreaming, Sinclair. Keep dreaming.").

Max is a very private person, walls grown high to keep people out and herself safe, but El knows her, knows how much she loves to sing along with “Footloose” or paint nails with El; Max has a small smile she uses when she’s touched by something someone does for her and there’s something in the way Max tilts her head when it happens that makes El realize Max doesn’t feel she deserves it and El wants to hurt whoever made Max feel like she was less than worthy of anything and *everything*.

Nancy and Jonathan always have happy smiles and teasing words for the Party, but the way they look at each other when they think no one is looking – all heated and loving and all-encompassing – makes El a little envious, even though she’s happy for them.

Steve comes back in the beginning of November, freshly graduated from the police academy, and El marvels at the changes in him: gone is the cocky edge covering a lack of self-esteem. In its place, a sense of self-assuredness, an easy awareness of what’s going on around him, and pride, sheer pride, at what he’s accomplished, that he has a place he belongs.

So, yeah, El sees a lot. But she *especially* sees this:

The way Hopper looks at Joyce whenever he and El go over to the Byers’ for dinner.

The way Joyce touches Hop on his upper arm, right below the shoulder, when they greet or she’s trying to get his attention – palm flat against him, fingers curled into his bicep, just enough to dent.

The way Hop asks after Joyce when El comes home from Will’s house or Joyce asks after Hop when El gets to Will’s house.

El sees this and she’s not dumb, but she thinks Hop and Joyce might be, with the way they dance around each other and look at each other when they think the other isn’t looking and especially the way they don’t *talk to each other about it*. And El has no idea what to do about it, but she wants to do *something*.

But then, El catches the last 2/3rds of “The Parent Trap” on TV one night and watches, enraptured, how twins Susan and Sharon expertly

bring their parents together.

And El gets an idea.

It's a Wednesday night the second week of November. El is over at Will's house, the remains of a pizza sitting in its box on the coffee table in front of them, backpacks full of finished school work by their feet.

Both Joyce and Jonathan are working, so Joyce left them some money for pizza, with El pitching in with money from Hop, who's pulling a late shift while teaching Steve the ropes of the station and the job.

The TV blares with the sounds of "MacGyver" and the two teens sit on the couch, El pressed against Will's side, the two of them holding hands as they watch TV. It's easy for them, Will thinks, to sit this way, snuggled up like two peas in a pod. It hasn't been an easy week for either of them, with the anniversaries and all, and Will welcomes the contact, the warmth. El trades her bravery for his easy comfort, the two of them protecting each other the best way they know how.

(will wishes she could live with him and his family, wishes she would stay all the time. he feels safer with her in the house, even though he won't ever admit it to anyone, and knows, selfishly, that she would use her powers to keep him safe no matter what. he also knows about her nightmares, knows how she craves long, powerful hugs when she wakes up trembling and crying and, though he's not as strong or as tall as mike, will knows how to hold el, how to anchor her and bring her peace when she's feeling anything but. that's what you do for your sister, right?)

"Hey, Will?"

El's voice cuts through the sound of the TV and Will glances over at her. "Yeah?"

"Can I ask you something?" El lifts her head from his shoulder.

Will turns to look at her. "Sure, what is it?"

El licks her lips, a habit she picked up from Mike. "What would you think if Joyce and Hop were together?"

The question catches Will off guard. "You mean, together like dating?"

El nods, a small smile on her face. "Yeah, like dating."

"Uh..." Will trails off. "I've never really thought about it before." But now he is thinking about, so Will takes a moment to stay in that thought. He can't help but think about Bob, whose death anniversary was just last week, and he remembers how happy his mom was. But he also knows that his mom and Hop have known each other a long time and Will's seen how his mom will fix her hair or smooth down her clothes when she knows Hop is at the door or in the next room. He also knows how much Hop and his mom have been through, knows that they trust each other and that's worth more than anything, because trust was hard for his mom after Lonnie left. But dating?

Will lets his thoughts carry him down that path, about his mom and Hopper dating, about what can happen when adults date. He thinks about, if his mom and Hopper date, if they would get married, if Will and his mom would move in with Hopper and El. He thinks about what that would be like, having El as a sister...having Hopper as a dad.

A warm feeling crawls into Will's stomach at the scene his mind's painting – family dinners, a house full of laughter and warmth, security, his mom happy. Will finds himself smiling. "Might not be so bad, them dating," he says.

El's smile grows wider. "Yeah, that's what I think, too." She turns back to watching TV and Will follows.

But, a couple of moments later, curiosity tugs at Will's thoughts. "Hey, El?"

"Yeah?"

“Why did you ask about Hop and my mom?”

El has a plan. A good plan. It's a good plan because it'll work – because it *has* to work.

Hop's given her so much, done so much for her, and El so badly wants to give back, wants to make him as happy as he's helped her be.

*(not a small piece of this is el's deep-seated desire for a mom. she remembers the first time joyce hugged her, when she was searching for will in the bath – warm, soft arms wrapping her in safety and acceptance – and el's associated that feeling with having a mother ever since. and each time joyce hugs her still, el feels that sensation wash over her and it makes her want to cry that it took so long for her to feel warmth of a mother's embrace, that she never got to grow up with her own mom, that it was **taken** from her.)*

No one knows about her plan, though Will suspects something, and El intends to keep it that way because two words: plausible deniability. Also, friends don't lie. And El's not going to lie – she might not tell the whole truth or stretch the meaning of words in the execution of her plan, but she's not going to lie. She also isn't going to force anyone to cover for her, to lie for her. Not that anyone would need to – she's not doing something illegal or underhanded or anything – but it doesn't hurt to play it safe. No, this is something she needs to do herself.

And, so, with Thanksgiving fast approaching, El initiates Stage 1 of her plan.

Monday, two weeks before Thanksgiving. Day 1 of the Plan. El stands out front of the high school to meet Mike after school, waiting for

him to come from Cross Country practice. She got out of Choir five minutes ago and is mentally running through what she needs to get done today, the checklist for Day 1 of the Plan.

The sound of the door to the locker hall opening pulls El from her thoughts and she smiles as she sees Mike walking towards her, dressed in regular clothes – brown corduroys and a dark green sweater – skin flushed and hair still wet from his post-practice shower. El bites the inside of her lip as she takes in the sight of him and imagines running her fingers through his wet hair. It's partially slicked back – probably from him combing it earlier – but gravity's mussed it up, thick locks pulling free, ends curling just a bit wildly...

El shakes herself from the reverie and chides herself for letting Mike distract her like he always does. But then Mike sees her waiting and the smile that tugs at his lips pulls El right back into being distracted by him.

Mike walks up to her, arms open in invitation, and El meets him part way, stepping into his embrace with ease. “Why, hello there,” he teases, arms looping around her, hands pressed against the middle of her back to hold her steady as she rises a bit to clasp her hands behind his neck, leaning against him and his warmth.

El pouts, but it's playful, exaggerated, and Mike smiles, knowing what El's doing and she loves that he can read her so well. “Why aren't you kissing me?” she asks, a hint of a whine in her voice that's only mostly an act.

Mike lets out a low chuckle that makes El shiver and she feels a smile breaking through as she breaks character. “Oh, I'm sorry. What a horrible oversight on my part. Let me fix that for you....”

Mike leans down and El tips her head up to meet him part way, lips meeting in a soft kiss that buzzes with a constant undertone of electric heat, just enough to send a shiver zipping down El's spine. El lets out a sound that's part sigh, part moan as their lips connect and re-connect. God, she could just do this all day.

El pulls back first, but not without Mike chasing her lips with his own for a couple final, nipping kisses. “That's better,” El sighs. She's

smiling like a love-sick fool and she doesn't care at all as she stands in his embrace, body pressed against hers.

Mike laughs and stretches forward just a bit to press a kiss to her forehead. "Waiting long?"

El shakes her head. "No, just a few minutes." She pulls back and takes one of Mike's hands as she starts walking away from the front of the high school, tugging him along with her. "Hey, do you mind if we stop by Melvald's and then the police station before heading to your house?" Hop's working late again, but El and Mike need to work on a lab report and an English assignment, so she's spending most of the evening at the Wheelers' until Hop comes to pick her up at 9:30.

Mike glances over at her with a confused expression that makes his face look funny since he's also still smiling at her. "Um, no, that's fine. What's going on?"

"I just wanted to get something for Hop, since he's working late," El says. And it's the truth – she's just not saying *why*.

But Mike smiles and El only feels a little guilty. "Ok, sure."

"Great, thanks," El says with a smile. "So, how was practice...?"

The two chat with ease as they make the short walk downtown. Hawkins isn't very big, so it takes them only 15 minutes before they're walking through the entrance to Melvald's. There're only a handful of customers milling through the aisles and, when El opens the door, setting off the ringing bell that announces people coming and going, she sees Joyce immediately turn to greet them, pausing only because she recognizes Mike and El.

"Hey, you two," Joyce says with a broad smile, eyes crinkling, as Mike and El approach the cashier's register Joyce is manning. "What brings you over?" Her face sobers and El sees the shadows that always creep along the edges start to invade the look she's giving them. "Is everything ok?" *Is Will ok?* El hears beneath the question.

"Everything's fine. Just picking up something for Hop," El says, cutting Joyce's worry off before it can really get going.

“I’m just tagging along,” Mike says with a wave. “Hi, Mrs. Byers.”

Joyce’s face smooths back out into a smile. “Hi, Mike. El, what do you need to pick up for Hopper?” Joyce asks.

At this, El blushes. “Well, he doesn’t know I’m here. I wanted to get something for him, like a gift, but just because. He’s done a lot for me and he’s been working late, especially since Steve got back, and his office is pretty depressing. I wanted to get something to cheer him up, maybe something for his desk?” El pauses. Time to execute Phase 1. “I was hoping that you could help me. Hop always talks about how long you two have known each other, that there’s no one who knows him better than you.” The words are something of an exaggeration, but Hop has told her that he and Joyce have known each other for years and that she’s one of his oldest friends; the leap to “no one knows him better” is not that farfetched as far as El is concerned (she can read between the lines, thank you very much).

Just as El hoped, her words bring a light blush to Joyce’s face. El can feel Mike looking over at her and she just *knows* he’s wondering what the hell is going on. But El keeps her focus on Joyce; one look at Mike will ruin *everything*. “Oh, that’s so sweet. Jim really said that?” Joyce lets out a giggle and continues on, saving El from responding. “Well, I think it’s nice you want to get him a gift, just because. Sometimes, those are the best ones.” Joyce reaches out to grab El’s hand. “Come on, I think I know something he’d like.”

15 minutes later, Mike and El walk out of Melvald’s, El holding a small gift bag that has a coffee mug with the words “You Brighten My Day” scrawled across the surface, with a handful of candy bars tucked inside the mug, like a candy bouquet. It’s not much (El doesn’t have much money), but it does the trick.

“Um, El? Mind telling me what’s going on?” Mike asks, squeezing her hand as they walk.

This is the only downside to Mike knowing her so well; El can’t get anything past him. She glances over at him as they walk to the police station. “What do you mean?” she responds, hoping to stall.

Mike stops them at the corner just around the block from the police

station and turns to face her fully. El mirrors him, but doesn't let go of his hand. "All that with Mrs. Byers and what Hopper's said about her, about having her help you pick out something for him."

"I wanted to get him something and I asked Joyce for help," El says; she really did want to get Hop something, but it's a partial truth and she knows what Mike's asking her.

Mike levels a flat look at her. "El, come on, really?"

El heaves a sigh. "Ok, fine," she says with a small huff. "I'm helping. Joyce and Hop."

To Mike's credit, he pieces it together within seconds and El knows he has when he groans, hand coming up to clap over his eyes. "El, are you trying to play matchmaker?"

El resists the urge to cross her arms over her chest. It sounds silly when he puts it like *that*. "Sort of," she says. "They already like each other, but they don't *talk* about it."

Mike drags his hand down his face. "El, they're *adults*. You shouldn't do this. This is going to backfire. It's such a bad idea – no, wait, it's a *stupid* idea and-"

Everything takes a sudden turn in an instant at Mike's words. El rips her hand from Mike's, the words "stupid idea" hitting her in the chest like a dagger to the heart. Mike's never, *ever*, used the word "stupid" for anything related to her and it *hurts*. She knows she's not as smart as he is, but she's not *stupid*. "Fine, I'll take this to Hop and meet you at your house, then." She feels tears begin to burn behind her eyes and, before she spins on her heel to keep walking, she sees the look on Mike's face change as it dawns on him what he just said – it's a look of horror and sadness and panic.

"No, El, wait, that's not what I meant, I-"

El feels his hand brush against her arm as he reaches for her, but she uses her powers to freeze him in place, keep him from talking. She knows she shouldn't use her powers this way, knows it's not fair to Mike, not right, but she's not in the mood to hear him explain, not in

the mood to let him weasel out of what he said. Because Mike always means what he says. She walks away, wiping away tears, trying to compose herself, and only unfreezes Mike once she's heading into the station, once she's far enough away that he can't stop her.

This is not how this is supposed to be going, El thinks. Hop's going to know she was crying (because he *always* knows, it seems, when something has upset her) and her whole plan is going to be ruined because her boyfriend has a stupid mouth (*See? She's not the only stupid one, here*).

El heads towards the front desk and has to smile a little when Flo spots her. "Ellie, dear!" Flo says, standing up and bustling around the desk to give El a hug. El likes hugs from Flo; it's what she imagines hugs from a grandmother would feel like.

"Hi, Flo," El says back. "Is Hopper here?"

Flo releases El and gives her a once over, completely ignoring El's question. "Uh-oh, honey, what happened? Why the tears?"

The question threatens to bring a new wave of tears that El only barely manages to hold back. "Boys are idiots, Flo," she says, anger mixing in with the sadness.

Flo gives her a sympathetic smile. "Aren't they always?" she says with a knowing look. "I take it this isn't what you wanted to talk to Hop about?" El shakes her head. "Ok, then, let's go get you cleaned up a bit so Hop doesn't know you've been crying, since I'm sure you don't want a man with a loaded gun chasing after your boyfriend, and then I'll let him know you're here."

El smiles. "Thanks, Flo." As the older woman guides her to the bathroom, El spares a glance at the entrance to the station and spies Mike running up and stopping just short of the glass doors. Their eyes meet and El knows the look she's giving him is a complicated swirl of anger and hurt and love – because, despite it all, she does love him – but she's glad he doesn't come after her, because she might just lose it and she can't, not yet.

But it's clear from the brief glimpse she gets of Mike's face that he

feels bad, feels *guilty*, and is so very sorry.

So, El just sighs and lets Flo lead her out of the bullpen to the ladies room, where El gently washes her face, careful not to get too blotchy, while Flo tells Hop that she's here.

Still doesn't help, though, because once El walks into Hopper's office, he takes one look at her and sighs. "Ok, what happened?"

Dammit. El sighs. "Nothing, just teenager stuff, it'll be fine." She takes in a deep breath. "I wanted to give you something, a present, just for being you." She walks over to the desk where Hopper is sitting and holds out the gift bag. Cue Phase 2. "It's from me and Joyce."

Hop's eyebrows climb high onto his forehead, his eyes seem to sparkle, and a soft smile pulls at his lips beneath his beard. "Joyce, huh?" he says as he takes the gift bag from El's hands.

El smiles. "Yeah, she helped me pick it out. She knows you really well." El pauses. "She likes you, I think."

That has Hopper arching a single eyebrow, but El can see the emotion in his eyes buried beneath the calm exterior. "Oh yeah, what makes you think that?"

El sighs. "She always asks about you when I'm at Will's house and she blushes whenever she does. And, a couple of times, when you come to pick me up at Will's house, I've seen her fix her hair to make herself look pretty before she answers the door."

Hopper puts the gift bag down and leans his forearms on the desk. "That so, huh?" He's trying to be stern, but El knows she has him.

"Just telling you what I see, Hop." El walks around Hopper's desk to press a kiss to his cheek, his whiskers tickling her skin as she does so. "I should go; Mike's waiting for me outside."

"You heading over to his house still, to do homework and have dinner?"

El nods. "Uh-huh. And you're picking me up at 9:30."

Hopper breathes out a couple silent chuckles. “Yes, at 9:30. And I’ll honk the horn if you’re not out by 9:35, so no lingering over kissing Mike goodbye.”

El levels a look at Hopper. “You could always ring the doorbell, you know.”

Hopper grins. “Why would I do that when my way bothers you so much?” he teases.

El rolls her eyes. “Bye, Hop.”

“See you later, kid. Good luck on your homework.”

Mike stands outside the police station, arms crossed so tight across his chest, he might as well be hugging himself. God, he feels like the biggest asshole on the face of the planet right now. El’s mad at him and he can’t say he doesn’t deserve it.

Because he hurt her, him and his big, fat mouth. He knew the moment he said the words “stupid idea” that it was the absolute wrong thing to say. Because El has always been so self-conscious about how hard she had to work to get to go to school with everyone, self-conscious of all the times someone says something she doesn’t understand because she didn’t get to grow up like a normal kid. Mike knows this because she’s told him, because he’s reassured her, telling her every time that she’s smart, that she’s not stupid, that he’s proud of how much she’s learned and how hard she works.

And he still used the word “stupid”.

He still doesn’t think El’s idea is a good one and that it’s going to backfire horrendously and probably get her into trouble; it’s more of a silly idea than a stupid one, though, but his mouth was operating on automatic, spitting out the word out of habit.

And, the look on her face, like the word was a physical blow...god, Mike has never felt worse in his entire life. He watched the tears well

up in her eyes and it made him so angry, *still* makes him angry, all directed at himself, that he was the one to put them there. He swore he would never hurt her, would always protect her like she protected him, and then he goes and makes her cry.

And when he tried to comfort her, to apologize, she used her powers on him and, Mike can't lie, there was a moment of panic, of fear, when she did. She's never used her powers on him like that before and it scares him a bit to know how strong she is, that she can take control from him in that way without a second thought. Yes, she's strong enough to pull him into the Void with her almost every night, but that's different somehow.

He was after her like a shot once she released him, missing her by just moments, catching a glimpse of her, eyes meeting as she was led away from the front of the police station. The look on her face had been one of hurt, but also love, and made Mike sigh with such relief before he felt even worse, because he made her cry and she still loves him somehow and he really doesn't deserve her.

So, now he stands outside the police station, leaning against the wall by the door, and waits.

Mike's not sure how long he stands out there in the rapidly cooling late November afternoon, but, eventually, the door opens and then El's standing in front of him. His arms fall to his side and Mike breathes her name like a prayer. "El, oh god, I'm-"

Mike stops when El holds up a hand, but she's not using her powers on him this time – he just shuts up when he sees her hand move. She's looking up at him, hurt and anger simmering low in her gaze, both still there, but like she's tired of holding on to them and can't let them go. "Mike, let me." She takes in a deep breath. "I know you think my idea is...bad," she starts, skirting around the S-word. "But you don't know what I see, Mike. And maybe it's a bad idea, maybe it will all go horribly wrong. But that's my mistake to make, Mike, ok?"

Mike can't hold back any more and the words begin tumbling out of his mouth. "I know, I know, and I'm so sorry, El. I never want to tell you what you can't do. And I never, *never* meant to call you stupid because you're not, *you're not*, ok? You're the smartest person I know.

You learned everything that took us eight years in less than one and I'm so, so proud of you. And it kills me that I hurt you because I *never* want to hurt you, because I love you so much and I don't deserve you, I really don't, and I'll apologize every day if you-"

Mike stops mid-sentence with a gasp as El launches herself at him, burying her face in his sweater, her arms holding him tight. Without thinking, Mike wraps his arms around her and holds her close. He leans down to press his cheek against the top of her head and his heart squeezes painfully when he feels her trembling against him. He's relieved to realize she's not crying, but it's a near thing.

"You hurt me, Mike." Her voice sounds so small, so *lost*. Mike never wants to hear her sound this way ever again.

Tears burn in Mike's eyes and he hugs El just that much harder. "I know, I'm sorry." And he means it, he means it with every fiber of his being.

"I know," El says, pulling back so she can look up at him. "I'm sorry, too. For using my powers on you."

Mike shrugs, relieved that they're moving past this, that El seems to have forgiven him, and vows to do better next time. "It's ok," he says. "I deserved it."

El shakes her head, adamant. "No, you don't. I was wrong, too, Mike."

Mike's not convinced, but he smiles anyway. "Can we call it even if I get to say I told you so when your matchmaking plan blows up in your face?"

El rolls her eyes and sighs, but Mike can see the hints of a smile pulling at El's lips. "Fine, fine. But my plan will work, Mike. You'll see." El grabs his hand and starts to pull him down the walkway towards the sidewalk. "C'mon, let's get to your house. We need to get-"

Mike's not ready to let her go, though. He yanks El back towards him, spinning her around, her hair fanning around her head and neck in a

wave of gorgeous curls. He catches her, other hand cupping her face, before he swoops in, leaning down to capture her lips in a hard kiss. El lets out a giggling sigh and rises on her toes to kiss him back, her free hand braced on his chest. Mike pulls back just enough to whisper against her lips. "I love you."

"I love you, too," she says, mouth moving against him with the shape of the words. And then she's the one capturing his lips, her mouth open beneath his, lips and tongue beckoning and Mike groans, warmth pooling deep in his gut, dizzying and electric. His hand slides into her hair, holding her close, as he returns the fervor of her kisses, lips parted, tongues meeting in soft, heated caresses that are heavy with the promise of suggestion. He wants to do this for the rest of his life and Mike lets out a soft moan at the realization, kissing El all the harder.

"Well, well, well, look what we have here."

Steve's on his way back from picking up dinner for him and Hopper when he spots Mike and El standing in front of the entrance to the station, hugging each other tightly. *Probably coming from saying hi to Hopper.* But there's something in the way they're hugging each other that has all the signs of teenage drama and Steve wants no part of it, but can't figure out how to sneak past it.

Moments later, though, the drama's over and El moves to start walking down the steps, Mike's hand in hers, tugging him behind her, but Wheeler spins her back towards him and catches her with a goddamn kiss in one of the smoothest fucking moves Steve has ever seen. *Damn, Wheeler's got game,* Steve thinks, more than a little proud of the kid. The lovebirds break to whisper sweet nothings to each other before they're kissing again, like they're trying to devour each other.

Steve stops for half a second and just looks at them, mostly amused at how the two are clearly rounding first base in public and don't even seem to care that anyone could be walking by. But there's also

something just...*absolute* about the two of them. No one would ever accuse Steve of being a bleeding-heart romantic, but, as Steve watches Mike and El, he can almost believe that there's someone for everyone, that everyone has half of them just waiting out there in the world. It's fucking mushy, but Steve finds himself hoping, anyway.

But, there's only so long Steve can stay outside without a) being a total fucking creeper and b) being late getting Hop's dinner to him.

Steve walks up to the pair and stands just a couple of feet away. They don't even notice him and, to their credit, Steve doesn't think he would have noticed anyone walking by if he was that absorbed in kissing the person he was in love with.

So, with a smile, Steve announces his presence in the most annoying way he knows how: by being an asshole. "Well, well, well, look what we have here."

The couple breaks apart and Steve hears El sigh. "Why do we always get interrupted?" she asks in a way that Steve can *hear* the way she's pouting. But then she untangles herself from Mike's arms and turns to see him with a smile. "Steve!"

El launches herself at him, wrapping him in a tight hug. "Hey, hey, watch it," Steve says, though he's hugging her back. "Don't want to get Wheeler's cooties all over me." Steve looks up at Mike, who's blushing furiously, and winks to show he's joking. "'Sup, Wheeler?"

Mike rolls his eyes. "Hi, Steve," he says, coming over to give him a hug when El steps back.

"What brings you two by the station?" Steve asks, choosing to sidestep the whole making out in front of the station thing.

"Just dropping something off for Hop," El says. She tilts her head, looking at Steve critically. "Is he treating you ok? He's not picking on you too much, is he?"

Steve won't lie, there's been a bit of ribbing from the other guys at the station, but only a little of it comes from Hopper and, all in all, he's making it through relatively unscathed. "Your dad's treating me

fine, Ellie Bellie,” he says, pausing as El wrinkles her nose at the nickname while Mike snorts with laughter. “Nothing more than his normal teasing.”

El nods and Steve knows it’s all she could hope for. “Good. Well, tell Hop I said to invite you over for dinner so you can tell me about the police academy.”

The words warm Steve’s heart and he knows he would do anything for the young woman standing in front of him. “Will do, El.”

Mike coughs to interrupt. “El, we should be going. Dinner’s soon and we need to get started on our homework.”

“Ok,” El says before giving Steve one last hug. “Bye Steve. Have fun tonight.”

“See you guys later. Good luck on your homework.” The two start walking away and, because Steve can’t resist, he calls out to Mike when they’re only about 30 feet away. “Hey, Wheeler!” Both Mike and El turn around, curious looks on their faces and Steve waggles his eyebrows. “Remember: no glove, no love.” Mike blushes furiously – *again* – and glares at him, grabbing El’s hand to start pulling her down the street.

“Mike, what’s he talking about?” Steve hears El ask over the sound of his own cackling, voice fading as Mike and El walk away.

“I’ll explain later....”

“Oh man,” Steve sighs to himself, still chuckling a little. “I crack myself up....”

Joyce’s shift at Melvald’s ends at 8pm and it’s with a sigh of relief when she slips her vest onto her hook in the back room and slings her purse over her shoulder. With a quick wave to Donald, Joyce steps out into the chilly November night.

But she doesn't head to her car.

Jonathan's at home with Will tonight and, despite the tight fear that fists her heart in a painful squeeze every so often, especially when Joyce thinks about this time last year or the year before that, she's not too concerned about her sons. They're safe and with each other, healthy and mostly happy, which is all any mother could ask for and a minor miracle for Joyce on the best of days. But they're getting there, day by day, piece by piece.

No, tonight, something else is on Joyce's mind. And it's with a determined stride that her feet carry her the 5 minutes from Melvald's to the Hawkins police station, the street lights guiding her way.

Joyce pushes open one of the glass doors and walks inside the warmth of the station. The lights are dimmed for the evening shift and she walks past the front desk, towards the bullpen where she sees Steve Harrington, dressed in the light blue uniform of an officer, sitting with his head bowed over a thick manual.

Steve looks up at the sound of Joyce's approach and smiles when he sees her. "Hey, Mrs. B," he says. "Here to see Hopper?"

Joyce struggles to keep her face neutral, but a small smile bleeds through. "Yeah, is he here?"

Steve looks back towards the hall that leads to Hopper's office, neck craning with the effort. "Uh, yeah, he's in his office looking over old case files. You want me let him know you're here?"

Joyce shakes her head, smile growing a bit wider. "No need, I know where his office is. Just wanted to talk to him about a couple of things before I head home for the night. Thanks, though."

"Ok, have a good night, Mrs. B," Steve says.

"You too, Steve," Joyce says, letting the young man get back to his work. She heads down into the darker hallway that leads to Hopper's office and stops just outside the closed door. Her heart's in her throat and she takes a deep breath, reminding herself that it's only Jim on

the other side. Still, Joyce takes a second to smooth down her hair and wishes she could take a minute in front of a mirror before she chides herself. *You're a grown woman, not a teenager. Get it together, Joyce.*

With a final, huffed breath to calm herself, Joyce reaches out to knock on the door. "Yeah?" comes the muffled reply and Joyce takes it as an invitation. She opens the door and steps into the office without a word, waiting for Jim to spot her. He looks up as she's leaning against the door, shutting it behind her, hands fiddling with the doorknob. And the smile Jim gives her makes her feel giddy all over. "Joyce, hi," Jim says, voice soft. He closes the manila folder in front of him, giving her his attention. "What brings you by?"

Joyce smiles and can't help giving Jim what she hopes is a flirty glance as she steps away from the door. "Just got off work, wanted to stop by and say hi." Joyce spots the mug El bought at the store earlier, though there's coffee in it now instead of candy. "I see El gave you the gift she bought."

Jim lets out a laugh and stands from his chair. "Yeah, left before I could open it, though." Jim walks around the desk and leans against it, now only a couple of feet from where Joyce is standing. She finds herself fidgeting with the hem of her blouse, just to have something for her nervous hands to do. "El told me something today," Jim says with a smile, arms crossing over his chest.

Joyce finds herself taking a half-step towards Jim. "Oh?"

"Yeah, she told me you like me. She told me that you ask about me when she's over at your house, that you fix your hair to make yourself look pretty before you answer the door when I come pick her up."

Joyce feels the blush heat up her cheeks, but she doesn't look away. Instead, she smiles back at him. "Well, El came in and said that you told her no one knows you better than I do." Joyce chuckles. "I think your daughter is trying to set us up, Jim."

This time, it's Jim's turn to take a step towards her. "Well, I think she's just going to have to live with the disappointment," he says.

“That she’s too late?” Joyce says, narrowing the gap between them even more.

“Exactly,” Jim says, closing the gap between them completely and kisses her like it’s been longer than since yesterday when he kissed her last. His beard tickles her cheeks and Joyce loves it, her hand coming up to cup the back of Jim’s head while his hands land on her hips and she feels the familiar zing of desire zip down her spine to settle low in her belly.

This, this right here, is what drove Joyce to come over after her shift at work: the feel of this man’s mouth on hers, his hands holding her firmly, and the overwhelming feeling of love and safety she gets whenever she’s with him.

Jim spins them around and, before Joyce knows it, she’s perched on the edge of his desk, her legs parting so he can step into the cradle of her thighs. One of his hands settles on the small of her back and Joyce can’t keep from moaning. She knows what he wants – what she wants, too – but they can’t. She breaks the kiss with a groan. “Jim, we can’t, not here.”

Jim sighs and presses his forehead against hers. “Dammit, I know,” he sighs. “I just...got carried away.”

Joyce smiles because she understands. She wishes they could get carried away, but that’s not who they are. She looks up at him and feels the weight of their history stretching between them like an epic saga: from their childhood days, to the mad rush to save Will and the other kids, to bonding over being single parents. There’s very few parts of her life that Jim hasn’t touched and it warms her to realize.

“We should tell the kids,” she says in a whisper. It’s been a month since this started – when, in her quiet kitchen, she lost her balance while walking past him to get him a drink and he caught her like he always does and then it was just the two of them, holding each other, only the kids were elsewhere in the house and they were alone and, before either one of them knew what was happening, they were kissing like it was the only thing they could, *should*, be doing. Ever since then, it’s been something they’ve been keeping to themselves, getting used to how it feels in private, out of under the watchful eyes

of their kids.

“Yeah, we should. Especially since El won’t give up on something once she gets an idea in her head.” Jim pulls back a bit. “Thanksgiving sound good?”

Joyce nods. This year, the Byers are doing Thanksgiving at the Hoppers’ house, just the 5 of them. It’s as close to a family moment as they’re going to get for a little while. “That’s a good idea.” She smiles and gives Jim a gentle push, her hand pressed against the center of his chest. He steps back and she gets to her feet. “I should get going. Jonathan and Will are going to wonder where I am eventually.” She stands on her toes to press a soft kiss to Jim’s lips and giggles as he chases the kiss when she steps down.

“If you must,” he sighs. Joyce heads for the door, her hand on the doorknob, and stops when Jim calls out to her. “Hey, you working Saturday?”

Joyce turns to look back at him, a curious smile on her face. “No, why?”

Jim resumes his earlier position of leaning against his desk, but there’s a sly smile on his face. “Well, I have it on good authority that the kids will be playing that game of theirs all day at the Wheelers’ and, well, I’ll have an empty house all to myself. All day.” He punctuates the statement with a waggle of his eyebrows.

Joyce giggles and blushes, feeling exactly like a teenager again. “And what do you suggest we do with all that time in an empty house?”

Jim’s smile stretches into a suggestive grin. “Oh, you know, a little bit of this, little bit of that.”

That pulls a full laugh out of Joyce. “Ok, it’s a date.”

Jonathan cringes as he tries to arrange the collar of his dress shirt. *Dammit, Nancy....* The hickey she gave him last night stands out in

stark contrast to both the white of his shirt and the paleness of his skin and is just in the right spot on his neck to peek out from underneath his collar.

He tries tugging at his collar a couple of more times before giving it up as a lost cause and he wonders again, with a bit of annoyance, why his mom insisted they dress nicely. They're just headed down the street to the Hoppers' house. Not exactly the Ritz, or anything. But, his mom had given him that look when he tried to push back, pleading and a little desperate, and Jonathan had given in without a fight.

With a sigh, Jonathan walks out of his room, the JVC that Bob had bought all those months ago secure in his grip, and goes out to the living room to find Will sitting on the couch, watching a rerun of the Thanksgiving Day parade. His little brother's wearing slacks and a sweater, his knee bouncing up and down as he waits, and Jonathan takes a moment to give Will a once-over: his skin is pale, but that's not unusual for November. It's not a sickly pale, and that's what's important. There's a healthy flush to Will's skin and he's grown at least 4 inches in the last year. He's nowhere near as tall as some of his friends, Mike in particular, but he's catching up to Jonathan and Jonathan finds himself wondering how much longer his little brother will be *little*.

Will looks over a second later and smiles when he sees Jonathan. "You look nice," he says.

Jonathan smiles and sits down next to Will. "You do, too." He nudges Will with his shoulder. "Looking forward to dinner?"

Will chuckles. "Well, Mom's not cooking it, so...."

Jonathan laughs. "Don't tell Mom that," he says.

"Don't tell Mom, what?"

Both Will and Jonathan look over as their mom steps into view, dressed prettily in a burgundy, velvet dress and black pantyhose, low black heels on her feet, hair pinned back and face painted expertly. Jonathan shakes his head just a bit – he knows *something* is going on

with his mom and Hopper and doesn't know what yet, but also knows his mom doesn't dress up for just anybody – and smiles. “Nothing, Mom. You look beautiful.” Jonathan stands up and gives Will a nudge with his foot to do the same.

“Yeah, Mom, you look great,” Will echoes.

Joyce smiles and blushes. “Aww, thanks you guys. You clean up pretty well, yourself.” She moves into the kitchen to gather her purse and jacket. “Are you both ready to go?”

“Yeah, we are,” Will says and Jonathan smiles at the excitement in Will's voice. It's nice to see him act like a normal kid, excited to see his friend. Jonathan sometimes dreams about that night in cabin a year ago, when they exorcised that monster out of Will, and he's thankful every day that his brother is still his brother.

Then, 15 minutes later, the Byers are at the front door to the Hoppers' house, using the short distance as an opportunity to get in a walk to, in Joyce's words, “whet their appetites”, and Jonathan reaches out to knock on the door.

Seconds later, a smiling El opens the door. Her hair is pinned up and she's wearing a pretty, dark green dress. Jonathan smiles back at her, warm affection washing over him. El's spent a lot of time at the Byers' house over the past year and Jonathan can't deny that he's come to think of her as another younger sibling. He knows she has superpowers – has seen her use them himself – but he can't help but watch out for her; it's all he knows how to do. And he's grateful, more than he can put into words, that she was there to help Will both times, that she saved them all, and if all she wants in return is love and family, then Jonathan can do that.

“You guys made it!” El exclaims, stepping aside to let them in. Jonathan enters first and finds himself with armful of teenage girl as El hugs him.

Jonathan laughs. “Hi, El. How's it going?”

“Good, glad you're here,” she says before hugging both Will and Joyce.

“Alright, alright, get in and close the door. You’re letting all the warm air out,” Jonathan hears Hopper call out as the older man steps out from the kitchen. Hopper’s also wearing slacks and a button down shirt, but it’s a little rumpled and Jonathan spies what looks like a smudge of flour on one of his cheeks.

The door shuts and Jonathan steps back to start documenting with the video camera, pointing the lens to capture the moment, making El giggle shyly and Hopper grumble, but no one stops him. There’s laughter and smiles and rapid fire conversation as everyone settles in and then Hopper’s walking towards the dining room table with side dishes in hand, followed by El who’s levitating the turkey and Jonathan thinks this is the most surreal holiday meal he’s ever taken part of.

Jonathan mostly listens in as the conversation flows around him, but he throws in a few pithy one liners every so often, peppering the conversation that El and Will are having, which roams from classes they have at school to movies they want to see to the upcoming D&D campaign Mike is planning for them. Joyce and Hopper listen the way that parents do and the whole thing is so damn happy, Jonathan knows his face is going to hurt from all the smiling he’s doing. He wants it always to be this way, safe and content, everyone happy and warm. It’s the only thing he *ever* wants.

And then, over pie, once everyone is mostly full and satisfied, Joyce clears her throat, drawing the attention of both her children, as well as El. “Guys, Jim and I have something to tell you.”

Jonathan looks back and forth between Hopper and his mom, watches as Joyce covers Hopper’s hand with her own, and sees the bashful looks they exchange. And he knows, just *knows*, what his mom is about to tell them

“What is it, Mom?” Will asks.

Joyce takes in a deep breath, gives Hopper one last look, and then turns to the kids. “Jim and I have been dating and we wanted to let you know.”

El gasps. “Really? How long?” There’s no hiding the excitement in

her voice and she's practically vibrating in her chair, she's so happy. It's one of the most adorable things Jonathan's ever seen.

"About a month," Hopper says. "So you can stop trying to play matchmaker, ok?"

With a squealing laugh, El jumps to her feet and hugs both Hopper and Joyce in quick succession before she turns to run upstairs. "I need to go tell Mike. He *told* me this would never happen. Be right back!"

Everyone watches El go and, when she's out of sight, Will turns to both Joyce and Hopper. "I'm happy for you guys," he says, meaning it, and Jonathan can't help but agree. He remembers when Lonnie was there and then gone, remembers Bob, remembers the grief *after* Bob. He knows his mom has never had it easy and she's given up so much for Jonathan and Will. And this, looking over at his mom as she smiles back and forth between her boys and Hopper, the happiness on her face – this feels real and long-term in a way Jonathan never imagined even hoping for his mom.

Suddenly, it's like a weight lifts from Jonathan's shoulders. Because his mom's not alone anymore. Jonathan's not under any illusions; he knows Hopper's not perfect, knows that it won't be smooth sailing always. But Hopper's been there in ways that no one has been there for the Byers in a long, *long* time and Jonathan knows he doesn't need to worry about his mom once he goes off to college. Because Hopper will be there. Hopper will *always* be there.

And the future feels so, *so* much brighter.

Notes for the Chapter:

And we're one step closer to one big happy family!

Thank you all for coming along with me on this crazy ride of a fic. I appreciate all the kudos and comments so, so much, you have no idea. Here's to seeing 2017 out in style and I'll catch you on the flip side in 2018!

14. Nov 1985 - Feb 27, 1986

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm so sorry for what's about to happen.

Also, Steve Harrington's my hero.

Nov 1985 - Feb 27, 1986

Despite how well everything seems to be going, Jim finds himself in a persistent state of waiting for the other shoe to drop. Because everything is going *too well* and, well, Jim has the kind of luck that tells him it's only a matter of time.

It starts as a tension that creeps up his spine as October edges closer to November and not even his burgeoning relationship with Joyce can make him forget entirely (though, he has to admit, kissing Joyce is quickly becoming the only time he can fully *breathe*).

Jim's a damn nervous wreck as the first week of November rolls around and he's just *waiting* for shit to get bad again, for something – an interdimensional monster, the damn lab, *something* – to force its way into the happy lives he and El are building together. But then Thanksgiving comes and goes, with Christmas soon after and, before Jim knows it, it's 1986 and everyone's fine.

The worst drama that passes is El comes down with the same flu that the rest of the Party gets and she's just *miserable* and nothing Jim does is the *right* thing and it's only when Joyce comes over with chicken soup and crackers, laying down in bed next to El and taking the girl into her arms, singing soft lullabies with a voice that's raspy and a little off-key, that El calms down and lets sleep claim her.

(this is the moment that jim knows, knows in the same way that he knows the sky is blue or that he loves el with every fiber of his being, that he's going to marry joyce byers and soon.)

And when January fades into February, Jim finally thinks that, maybe, there is no other shoe waiting to drop, that maybe, for once,

he was overreacting and that all he has to worry about is figuring out what to do for El's 15th birthday.

This is, of course, the moment when everything goes terribly, *horribly* wrong.

It's a chilly Thursday afternoon the last week of February, a week before Spring Break. El tucks her hands under her armpits to keep them warm as she rolls her eyes at Dustin; he's walking with her on her way home, trying *desperately* to convince her to try out for the Spring Musical.

"C'mon, El, you can sing *and* you can dance. We need people like you in the Ensemble. 'Guys and Dolls' is *all* about the Ensemble."

"*Dustin*," El whines, though she's giggling. "I don't *want* to be in the musical. I already have too much to do." The wheels of Dustin's bike crackle and crunch against the gravel in front of El's house as they turn up the walkway.

"Please, El, *please*? For me? I swear, I'm not above begging." Dustin drops his bike to the ground before dropping to his knees, hands clasped beseechingly. "Please, El? Please, please, please!"

El lets out a heavy sigh, defenses effectively worn down. "Ok, ok, *fine*, I'll do it."

Dustin springs to his feet and wraps her in a tight bear-hug, lifting her off her feet in his exuberance. "Thank you, El. This is going to be great, you'll see!"

El's laughing as he sets her down and she can't stop smiling; Dustin's excitement is *always* contagious. "I'll take your word for it," she says. "But you owe me, Henderson."

Dustin presses one hand to his heart, the other raised, palm facing her. "On my honor, I shall owe you a favor. Cross my heart and hope to die."

El rolls her eyes. “Let’s not go that far, Dustin,” she says, swinging her backpack around on one shoulder to pull out her house keys from the front pocket. “Wanna come in for some hot chocolate before heading home? It’s pretty cold outside.”

Dustin smiles. “I could use a warm pick-me-up before heading home. Thanks, El.” Leaving his bike on the ground, Dustin walks with El up the front porch and follows her inside as she opens the door.

El drops her backpack on the ground and kicks off her snow boots, shedding warm outer layers as she heads towards the kitchen. She hears more than sees Dustin do the same, but the excitement in his voice as it follows her into the kitchen is palpable. “Hey, I hope you have some of those little marshmallows. Hot cocoa’s not complete without – El, watch out!” The shift from excitement to terror in Dustin’s voice is like whiplash and El turns to look at him, heart in her throat.

And then a sharp pain pricks on the side of her neck and the world spins dizzily.

Hands grab at her, wrapping around her arms and legs, but El’s focused on Dustin, hand stretched out, reaching for him. There are men holding him back as he struggles and El tries to get to him, but she’s being held back, too. The look on Dustin’s face is full of fear and terror and El *needs* to get to him. Why won’t they let her go to him? Can’t they see he’s hurting, that he needs her?

“Let her go!” Dustin yells, sounding like he’s so very far away, voice thin and muffled.

“What do we do with the boy, sir?” one of the men holding Dustin.

“There can be no witnesses, I’m afraid.”

Through the haze, El’s blood turns to ice.

Papa.

El struggles harder and feels the dizzying haze close in. She fights to stay conscious, to get away. No, this *can’t* be happening, no, NO, NO!

She tries to fight, tries to get away, tries to use her powers. But she's *stuck*, powerless.

The men holding Dustin shove him to the ground, where he lands hard, face down, with a cry. El watches, like through a fog in slow motion, as one of the men pulls out a gun and, before Dustin can move, pulls the trigger.

The sound of gunfire ricochets inside the house and El screams, tears streaming down her cheeks. *Dustin!*

"Get her into the car, quickly."

No, no, no, no! El cries, but she's weak and it comes out as nothing more than soft whimpers. She feels herself slipping into unconsciousness and panic steals over her.

So El does the only thing she can think of: she calls out to Mike.

Mike's sitting in the basement, history book open on his lap, when he hears El call out for him in his mind, feels the brush of her mental presence intensify – he can always feel her, even when they're far apart, a reassuring reminder that she's never far away.

Mike!

Mike starts to smile. *El, hi-*

Mike, help! Please, please. It's Papa, he- And then, nothing – no voice, no presence, nothing. Just gone, like she never existed, and Mike feels *empty*.

Mike's heart leaps into his throat, panic and fear turning his limbs to ice. For a moment, Mike can't breathe. *No, no.*

Then, he's running, books cast aside, legs carrying him up the stairs from the basement as fast as they'll take him. He's out of breath, fear stealing the air from his lungs, by the time he gets to the phone in the

kitchen.

"Mike, are you ok?" he hears his mom ask from where she's beginning preparations for dinner.

But Mike barely hears his mom, fingers trembling as he dials the phone number for El's house. He presses the phone to his ear. "C'mon, pick up, pick up," he breathes. She should be at her house, she *has* to be. She was going home straight after Choir – with Dustin, who's been trying to convince El for days to audition for the musical.

The phone just rings and rings, though, and Mike feels a wave of dizziness wash through him. His hand shoots out, slamming down on the receiver, and then he's dialing the number for Will's house.

Two rings later, the line picks up and Mike hears Will's voice in his ear. "Hello?"

"Will!"

"Oh, Mike, hi, what's-" But there's no time for small talk.

"You need to get to El's house. *Right now!*"

"Why, what-?"

"There's no time. I heard her, Will. You need to hurry! Someone's after her! I'll meet you there as soon as I can."

There's a gasp of fear that come from Will that perfectly encapsulates what Mike's feeling in this moment. "I'll head right over."

"Ok, but *hurry*." Mike hangs up the phone without saying goodbye and then he's off again, ignoring the way his mom calls after him. He races up the stairs to Nancy's room and charges through the door, slamming it open.

"Nancy!" he calls out, not even phased by the sight in front of him – Nancy and Jonathan are on her bed, his shirt half unbuttoned, her straddling his lap.

"Mike, get out!" Nancy yells.

“Nancy, you need to take me to El’s house, right now. *Please!*” Mike knows he’s spiraling out of control, knows he sounds like a madman, wild and unhinged. But it feels like all his worst nightmares are coming true all at once.

Something of his panic must be convincing enough because both Nancy and Jonathan rush to their feet.

“I’ll drive,” Jonathan says, throwing on his jacket.

Will doesn’t even know if he hung up the phone right and he doesn’t really care. The terror that forced his heart into his throat the moment Mike told him El was in trouble spurs him out the door, legs first carrying him to his bike and then furiously working the pedals. The cold air burns his lungs, begging for him to slow down, but Will can’t, he just can’t. El’s *in trouble* and she needs him.

It takes 5 minutes – *5 minutes too long* – for Will to get to El’s house. And when Will gets there, he stops, frozen in his tracks, fear turning his limbs to stone. Because Dustin’s bike is laying on the ground and the front door to El’s house is just sitting wide open. There should be nothing immediately off-putting about the scene, but it fills Will with dread and he finds himself dropping his bike and walking inside the house.

It’s like he has no control over his own body, like he’s watching someone walk his body up the walkway, feet dragging slightly on the paved stones. And it’s with a heavy, pounding heart that Will walks up the stairs to the front porch and across the threshold into El’s house.

Time feels like it’s slowed to a crawl, surreal, as Will takes a handful of steps inside the house. He looks to his right, into the dining area, eyes scanning. His head turns, taking in the kitchen, then up towards the stairs, and then left into the living room and – *oh. Oh no.*

“Dustin!” Will’s by his side in a blink, tears blurring his vision.

There's blood, *so much blood*, and it pools around Dustin's body, soaking into the carpet. Will reaches out for Dustin, hands trembling, unsure what to do, what's safe to touch, *if Dustin's still alive*.

The thought causes a sob to hitch in his throat and Will manages to do something. He grabs Dustin, still lying face down, and places one hand on his arm, the other on the middle of his back, inches from what Will can only guess is a gunshot wound. Will gives Dustin a gentle shake. "Dustin?"

No response.

The hand on Dustin's back slides up, fingers stretching out to press against the side of his neck. Will begs and pleads with every higher power he can think of and can't help the way he sobs when he feels the flutter of Dustin's pulse against his fingertips. "Hang on Dustin, I'm going to get help." And then Will's rushing to the phone, shaking fingers dialing 911, hoping, *praying*, he's not too late.

It takes far too long to get to El's house. Mike can't watch the scenery go by, so he sits, eyes clenched shut, hands fisting in his hair, hunched over his own legs with his elbows digging into his knees. He's aware that he's rocking back and forth and that his mouth is moving, whispers gliding past his lips in hushed prayer – *please, this can't be happening, it's just a misunderstanding, everything's fine, it has to be*.

"Mike." Nancy's voice pulls him from his stupor and Mike looks up to see that they've arrived at El's house. Mike all but launches himself out of the car and finds himself frozen in place for half a second. There are two bikes lying discarded on the ground – Will's and Dustin's – and the front door is wide open.

And off in the distance, the faint sounds of sirens.

Mike feels like he's going to be sick but finds himself running, feet slipping a bit on the gravel, momentum keeping him upright enough

so he can leap up the porch and in through the front door. His feet skid on the hard floor of the foyer, heart in his throat. “El!” he calls out, panic pitching his voice higher.

“Mike, in here!”

It’s not El, but Will, and Mike turns towards the sound of Will’s voice and – *no*.

“Dustin!” Mike calls out. He’s by Dustin’s side in a second, kneeling on one side of Dustin’s body, Will on the other. “Oh, god....” There’s too much going on, too much to take in – Dustin’s prone form, the blood pooling around him, Will’s hands pressed against Dustin’s back, blood coating his fingers. Off to the side, Mike hears the sound of Nancy’s shocked cry. “What happened?” Mike asks, voice thick. There are tears pooling in his eyes, blurring his vision, and Mike blinks them away rapidly, but more take their place.

“I don’t know,” Will says and he’s crying too, breathing heavy. “I found him like this. I-I called 911 and they told me, uh, told me to put pressure on the wound. I think...I think he’s been shot.”

“And El?” Mike asks. “Where is she?”

Will only shakes his head, lips trembling.

No.

Mike gets to his feet. “El!” He moves quickly through the rooms on the first floor, frantically calling her name, and then he’s upstairs, throwing doors open.

But there’s no sign of her.

El’s gone.

And Mike is lost.

The ambulance is the first to arrive and three squad cars are on its tail with more – many more – on the way. A gunshot wound was reported at the damn *Police Chief's* house, for crying out loud, and every uniformed officer is on alert.

Mike recognizes some of the officers who ask him questions – or who try to ask him questions, anyway. Because Mike is in shock, he can *feel* it.

“C’mon kid,” one of the officers asks, frustrated with Mike’s non-responsive verbals, “I’m just trying to help, here.”

“Well, then, back off, let the kid breathe.”

Mike turns to see Steve Harrington striding towards him and something in him breaks just a little.

“Rookie, what are you doing?” the questioning officer asks.

“Steve,” Mike breathes.

“Oh, right,” the officer says, “Forgot that you know these kids. Hopefully, you’ll have better luck, Harrington.”

And then Steve’s standing in front of Mike, hands on his shoulders. “Mike, are you ok? What happened?”

Mike sucks in a deep breath. “Where’s Hopper?” he asks, ignoring Steve’s questions, and cranes his neck, trying to peer through the small crowd of officers and paramedics who are working to help Dustin before transporting him to the hospital.

“He’s here, Mike. I’m sure he’ll want to talk to you in a just a bit.” But Mike keeps looking for Hopper, not stopping until he sees the older man and his breath catches in his throat when he does. Because Hopper’s standing, arms crossed over his chest, murder written on every inch of his face. But the lines of his shoulders, the stance of his legs, all scream tension and fear and *worry*. Mike’s heart sinks, feeling guilty. If Mike had been here earlier, with El, he could have done *something*, could have stopped this, could have-

-Probably ended up like Dustin, lying shot on the floor of the living

room.

Tears creep back across Mike's vision and Mike feels a hand clap lightly against his cheek. He refocuses on Steve, still standing in front of him, worry etched on his features. "Mike, what happened?"

"I don't know," Mike chokes out. "I was at home, studying and then-" He gulps. "I heard El's voice in my head. She and I can, uh, well, she can talk to me with her mind using her powers. Then, I called Will and then Nancy and Jonathan drove me over while Will came over and found Dustin." Mike pauses, lips clamping to try and hold himself together. "I looked for El when I got here, but she wasn't here. She's gone, Steve."

"Hey, no, *no*," Steve says, hands clutching at Mike's shoulders. "We'll get her back, Mike. We'll get her back from whoever took her."

"Her *Papa*," Mike hisses. A ball of anger settles in the middle of his chest, burning against his heart and stomach. "The guy who ran the lab. That's who took her."

Steve's jaw clenches. "Then that's who we'll go after."

Time becomes a blur of paramedics and police officers, questions, ambulance rides, filling out paperwork at the hospital and coordinating everything.

And, somehow, Steve has become the person who's responsible for keeping everything together.

Oh, sure, he's not leading the investigation into what happened at the Hopper household, but he's smack dab in the middle of it. Since starting at the station back in November as the most junior officer on the Hawkins police force, he's become Jim Hopper's unofficial partner.

Normally, given the severity of the incident, Jim himself would be leading the investigation. But since the incident with the shooting

took place at his house and his daughter is listed as missing, Powell's taking on spearheading the investigation with Jim recusing himself.

So Steve finds himself watching out for not only Jim Hopper, but the entire goddamn Party. He tries not to think of Dustin, who's currently in surgery to fix the damage the gunshot wound's inflicted – punctured lung, bullet missing his heart by an inch, possibly ruptured spleen, and other internal damage that's still being determined. Steve feels the sour lump of tears creep up his throat and he swallows hard to keep it down and wishes he didn't have to. But, as he looks around the hospital waiting room, his arms full with holding Claudia, who's crying silent tears as she waits for the doctors to come out to tell her how her son is doing, Steve knows there is no one else who can take the mantle normally reserved for Jim.

Because Jim's sitting in one of the uncomfortable chairs that hospitals fill waiting rooms with, looking lost and trying to hide it. Joyce is next to him, holding his hand, her face pale with worry.

Steve's gaze slides over to one corner of the waiting room, where Nancy and Jonathan are sitting, surrounded by Mike and his friends – the ones who are here and not in surgery. Jonathan has his arm around Will, who still has traces of blood on his hands and tear tracks on his cheeks. Lucas and Max are holding hands, fingers gripping each other – Lucas looks shocked, ashen with disbelief and Max is trying to figure out what to do while she wrestles with her own feelings.

Nancy and Mike sit at the edge of the group and Steve feels his heart go out to the younger Wheeler kid. Nancy has her hand on Mike's shoulder, but it's clearly having no effect. Mike is pale, too pale, freckles standing out in stark contrast, and there's a glazed look in his eyes. He looks small, despite how tall he's become, and lost, so lost.

Steve remembers back before El came back into everyone's lives and he remembers how Mike was then, distant and half-missing, and angry, so *angry*. But this is worse – this is *so much worse*. Because El's been a daily part of Mike's life for a year and a half now, a year and a half of being able to see her and touch her and just be with her. Mike knows now what he would be missing and if they don't get her back...

No, Steve's not going down that road, he's just not. They *will* get El back; anything else is completely and absolutely unacceptable.

It feels like forever until the ER doctor walks in and calls for Claudia, the entire waiting room on the edge of their seats as the doctor tells her that the surgery was a success and would she like to see her son? In an instant, the kids are all demanding to go, too, voices rising in excited concern.

Steve has to smile as the doctor gives in – “But with some *restrictions*.” – and it hits him again just how strong the bonds are between the Party. There's nothing that can get in their way when it comes to each other.

“We'll make sure they don't get too rowdy,” Nancy says to the doctor, grabbing Jonathan by the hand and pulling both of them to their feet.

And then it's just Steve, Joyce, and Jim left in the waiting room and the silence grows thick and heavy around them.

Joyce glances at Steve for a second before she turns back to Jim. “I'm going to go grab some probably horrible coffee. You boys want anything?” Steve shakes his head and Jim mumbles a “no thanks” that sounds half not-there. Oh shit, this isn't good.

Joyce must have the same thought because she looks at Steve with not a small amount of panic in her eyes and a plea for Steve to do something, *anything*, to shake Jim from the stupor he's falling into.

So, when Joyce leaves the room and it's just the two of them, Steve moves, sitting in the chair right in front Jim. “Hey, boss,” Steve says, pulling the chair forward so he's inches from the older man. “You hanging in there?”

The question, a clearly stupid one, gets a response from Jim in the form of a withering glare. “What the fuck do you think, kid?”

A humorless smile crosses Steve's face and relief flows through him. Jim's response is harsh, but at least he *responds*. “I think you need to call your friend from the lab,” Steve says with no preamble, bringing up the thought he had hours ago when he talked to Mike outside

Jim's house, when Mike mentioned El's "papa".

"Yeah," Jim more exhales than says.

"Mike told me that it was her 'papa' that took her. That was that Dr. Brenner guy, right?"

Jim narrows his eyes at Steve. "And how does he know that?"

Jesus, didn't Jim talk to Mike *at all*? Steve shakes his head; everything's so fucking chaotic, it really shouldn't surprise him that some things have fallen through the cracks. "Mike says El can talk to him with just her mind. That's how he knew something happened. He was the one who called Will and told him to go over to your house. If that hadn't happened, Dustin might not be alive."

The news brings a renewed sense of focus to Jim's gaze. "Wait, what? El can talk to Mike with her *mind*? How long has this been going on?"

Steve shrugs. "You'll have to ask him when he gets back from seeing Dustin. But, if Brenner took El, then your friend from the lab might know where. Those government types all talk, I'm sure." Steve knows Jim is a man of action, that he needs a direction to be pointed in, and Steve just gave him one.

Steve watches as Jim nods once, resolute, before standing. "I'm going to go make a couple of calls," he says, looking down at Steve before laying a hand on Steve's shoulder. "Thanks, Harrington," Jim says, voice warm and thick with gratitude that mixes with the pain and fear he's feeling over El's absence.

Steve feels a similar wave of emotion wash over him. "Anytime, boss."

Now they just have to get El back.

For as long as she lives, Nancy will never be able to forget the image of Dustin lying on the living room floor in Hopper's house, blood

everywhere, looking more dead than alive.

And now, standing in a hospital corridor, Jonathan pressed tightly against her side, watching her brother and his friends – *the ones who are here*, Nancy thinks, El's absence grating against every nerve like sandpaper over an open wound – go, one at a time, into the recovery room where Dustin and his mom are.

Nancy can see into the room through the half-open door and she can't look away from Dustin, lying unconscious. She's watched this boy grow up over the past several years, larger than life, a force of nature in the form of caring smiles and exuberant laughter. Now he looks frail, pale, shrunken. There are tubes, so many tubes, connected to Dustin's body, sustaining him while he sleeps.

Claudia Henderson stands at his side, hands clutching one of Dustin's, the hand without the IV drip and the heartrate monitor, looking like her entire world is lying in a hospital bed in front of her, critically wounded, like she will just cease to exist if Dustin never gets up again.

Tears swim in Nancy's vision and she wipes them away with a hasty hand. She can't cry, can't afford to cry. There's been too many tears the past couple of years and Nancy won't let them drag her down again.

So, instead, she keeps an eye on Mike and worries. Her brother is pale and withdrawn, vestiges of shock still clinging to him and Nancy, who's never been one for praying, finds herself doing just that – praying that El's safe, that she'll come back, that she'll be ok.

Because Nancy doesn't know if Mike will survive if none of that is true.

The thought sends a burgeoning wave of determination to swell inside her breast. No, El will come back, even if Nancy has to get her back singlehandedly.

Movement out of the corner of Nancy's eye draws her attention away from Dustin's hospital room and both she and Jonathan turn to see Steve walking towards them, still in his new officer's uniform. It's

both strange and completely not that Steve's become a police officer. Because the boy Nancy first met would have rather died than become a member of law enforcement, but the man he's become is perfectly suited for it: dedicated, caring, protective.

Steve stops inches away from Nancy and Jonathan, face determined. "Steve," Nancy says, keeping her voice low. "Everything ok?"

Steve cocks his head to the side just a bit, eyebrow raised in grim humor. "As well as can be expected, considering," he says. "I need you to bring the kids to the Byers' house, Nance. Or Mike, at the very least."

It's Jonathan who asks the next question. "Why?"

"Because El warned Mike about what was happening using her mind and Hopper needs to know how. He's gone to call the guy he knows from Hawkins Lab, but when he gets back, he's going to need to talk to Mike."

There's something in the way Steve tells them this that makes Nancy realize something. "You have a plan."

Steve smiles, but it's small, tight. "I have a 'maybe'." And, somehow, all Nancy feels is a sense of relief because it might be "maybe", but it's something.

It's *hope*.

Jim doesn't make it to the Byers' house until the morning two days after El is taken.

Bile swirls in his gut, creeps up his esophagus, and sours his mouth. El's out there somewhere – his little girl, taken from him (*again*) – and he doesn't know *where*. A bottomless pit of panic sits just out of the corner of his mind's eye, waiting to swallow him whole at the thought. It's a place Jim's been before and he can't afford to go back there.

When Sara had gotten sick, there was nothing Jim could do – no one he could fight. But it's different this time and the thought centers him, keeps him focused and driven because the enemy is human this time.

Because the enemy is Dr. Martin Brenner and Jim's going to kill him.

Jim pulls up behind Joyce's station wagon and puts the car into park and he spares a glance at the passenger seat next to him.

A stack of files – maps, reports, other documents – sits next to him, a “gift” from Sam Owens and one piece of the puzzle that will bring Jim to Brenner *and* to El. The other piece, according to Steve, is what Mike has to tell about El's ability to send her thoughts to him and to hear Mike's in return (it says a lot about the strangeness of his life that this doesn't even throw him for a loop and Jim wonders when this all became *fucking normal* or at least not unexpected).

A turn of the key kills the engine and Jim gathers the files and hopes they were worth the trip out to Indianapolis. When he'd made the call to Owens from the hospital, Jim hadn't been able to get out more than “Brenner has my daughter,” before Owens cut him off – “Not over an unsecure line” – and gave him an address and a time: a nondescript office building in Indianapolis, 10pm the next evening, with the instruction to “come alone”.

So Jim had waited, made the drive, breaking the speed limit the entire way, and waited *again*, left with nothing to do but stew in his own thoughts and worries for hours.

When Owens had arrived, *finally*, he also came alone, still limping a bit with the injury he sustained in 1984. As he passed over the files Jim now carries with him into Joyce's home, Owens also passed on a warning.

“Brenner's gone rogue,” Owens had said. “We don't know how many men he has with him, he's been MIA for months now, but we think there are least 5 others with him. I know I don't need to tell you this, but as far as the United States government is concerned, Brenner is dead. Do with that what you will, but we can't get involved.”

“Can’t? Or won’t?” Jim had asked.

Owens had given him a small, almost angry smile. “Won’t – won’t get involved. The higher-ups, I’m afraid, want nothing to do with any of this, want it all swept under the rug. It...hasn’t been a good look for the government, what with what happened to the Holland girl and Hawkins Lab in general. They would prefer if the whole thing just... went away.”

The meeting lasted only a few minutes longer, Owens walking Jim through the files he was handing over before wishing him luck. And then he was gone, leaving Jim pouring over the files Owens had left behind, scanning lists of shuttered facilities and histories of Brenner’s work for the DOE. He sat in that office building for hours, leaving only when the sun started coming over the horizon and thinking that it was going to take a lot of luck and way too much time to find El. Because there were dozens of places Brenner could have taken her, places where he would have the resources he would need, scattered all across the country, and Jim has to find a way to narrow them down.

This is, if Jim is lucky, what he hopes Mike can help with. If Mike and El have a way to communicate with her powers, then maybe....

He opens the door – it’s unlocked and Jim hopes it’s only because Joyce is home and is expecting him to drop by at any time – and doesn’t make it more than a handful of steps before Joyce is rushing towards him from where she was perched on the couch, making short work of the distance between them. And then she has her arms wrapped around him. Jim closes his eyes and just leans against her, arms full with the files, his head tilting to press against the top of her head.

“Jim,” Joyce breathes, pulling back so she can take his face in her hands. “How did it go? Did you find anything?”

Jim nods. “Yeah, but it’s a lot – maybe too much.” He lets out a sigh and gently pushes past Joyce to head towards the kitchen. “Are the kids still here?”

Joyce shakes her head, following him. “They’re all over at the

Wheelers', but they'll be by later this morning." She grabs his arm as he drops the files to the kitchen table. "Jim, have you gotten any sleep?"

Jim takes in a deep breath. "Joyce, I don't have time to—"

But then Joyce's face sets with a stern look. "Jim, you need to rest if you want to help El." The hand holding onto his arm begins pulling him away from the kitchen and down the hallway towards the bedrooms. "Here, come lie down in my room and get some sleep. I'll wake you when the kids get here."

Jim wants to argue, wants to push back, wants to say he's fine, but he doesn't have the energy and one look at Joyce's bed triggers the gravitational pull of sleep. Wordlessly, Jim moves to the bed and just falls on top of the covers.

He's asleep before Joyce can even close the door....

...And wakes what feels like moments later to the sensation of someone shaking him.

Jim opens his eyes with a groan, groggy and almost hungover with sleep. He's lying on his side, curled around one of the pillows, and he so very much wants to roll over and go back to sleep. The mattress dips and Jim looks to see Joyce sitting down next to him, arm reaching out so she can run her hand across his back.

Joyce smiles, soft and sad. "The kids are here, Jim."

Jim sucks in a deep breath through his nose. God, he wants a cigarette. "Gimme a minute," he mumbles.

"I'll make some coffee and check back on you in a bit," Joyce says before leaning over to press a kiss against his mouth. Then she's standing up, leaving him alone in her room.

It takes a minute, but Jim manages to get out of bed and to his feet.

He runs a hand over his face, trying to bring some sense of wakefulness back to his mind and body, before he stumbles to the bathroom.

A few minutes later, Jim steps into the living room, where the kids, Nancy, Jonathan, and Steve are talking in hushed tones that quiet the moment they all realize he's there.

Jim takes a moment to give the whole group a once over, Dustin and El's absences all too noticeable. Everyone's tired and drawn, too pale, worry casting shadows across the lines of their faces. But no one is worse than Mike and Jim feels his heart go out to the kid. Because if there's anyone who's more affected by El's disappearance than Jim, it's Mike. There are dark shadows under his eyes and a flash of panic in his gaze that makes Jim think that they're the same distance, mere steps, from the edge of despair.

Steve gets up from where he's sitting in the arm chair and walks over to him. "Hey, Hopper," he says. "How'd it go?"

"I got something," Jim says. He can feel everyone's eyes on him and there's no small amount of hope reflected on everyone's faces. He gives Steve a small smile before turning to push past him so he can kneel in front of where Mike is sitting on the couch. "Hey, kid," he breathes.

Mike looks back at him, torn between hope and sadness, like he wants to believe so badly but doesn't dare so he can't get disappointed. "Did...did you find her?" His voice comes out in a thin croak, like he hasn't spoken in hours. *Probably hasn't.*

Jim sighs and shakes his head. "No, but I have a list of possibilities. In fact, that's what I was hoping you could help me with."

The confusion that crosses Mike's face is the most animated Jim's seen him be since everything started. "Me? How?"

"Steve told me about how El alerted you that something was happening, that she can talk to you with her mind. I was hoping you could use that to figure out where she is, somehow."

The statement sounds off a flurry of crosstalk.

“Wait, what?” Nancy.

“Whoa, El can talk to people using her *mind*?” Lucas.

“How long has this been happening?” Joyce.

“That’s not how it works,” Mike cuts in, voice rising to be heard. Immediately everyone shuts up.

Knees complaining about kneeling, Jim rises to his feet and goes to sit in the armchair Steve vacated minutes earlier. “Explain how it works, then.”

Mike sighs, a flush blossoming high on his cheeks. “Hold on, I gotta explain a few things, first....” And Mike takes them through the past several months, starting when the Wheeler family went on vacation to Florida and Mike and El talked using his SuperCom, El using her powers to talk to him through the radio. He then goes on to explain about how they discovered she could use the Void to let them talk with just their thoughts and, eventually, pull him into the Void as well so they could *see* each other when they were apart, too.

“...But I haven’t felt her in *hours*.”

Jim’s mind is spinning – somehow, his teenage daughter is using her powers to see her boyfriend every night and, though he knows there’s no way to stop her, it’s something that he should probably find inappropriate, right? – but Mike’s last words stop him cold. “Wait, what? What do you mean by ‘felt’?”

Mike licks his lips, nervous. “Well, normally, I can feel her. In my mind, you know? Like an arm or a leg, or something. But, when she called out to me, asking for help, she just cut off and then I couldn’t feel her anymore.” Mike stops, taking in a trembling breath. “I haven’t felt her since then. I don’t even know if she’s still-”

“Mike, no,” Nancy says, cutting him off. “You can’t think that.”

“Nancy’s right, Mike,” Jim says. “Something else is probably going on. I doubt Brenner would take her only to-”

But then, Mike gasps, looking off to one side, eyes going unfocused. He exhales, breathing out one word and one word only.

“El?”

Notes for the Chapter:

:'(...told you I was sorry...

15. Feb 28 - Mar 2, 1986

Notes for the Chapter:

Alright, so I felt bad about leaving you with that horrible cliffhanger, so I got to work cranking this out.

Warning: this chapter's ugly content-wise. Warnings for violence, child abuse, and sexual threats. I had to up the rating; I couldn't justify leaving it T after this chapter.

Feb 28 - Mar 2, 1986

It's cold and everything hurts.

This is the first thing she's aware of.

The rest comes slowly to El. Her teeth chatter and she shivers uncontrollably, feeling like her skin has been turned to ice. And when she tries to curl in on herself, tries to huddle against the frigid temperatures, it feels like her limbs are miles away. But she presses on, fighting for every inch, and it's like she's moving through molasses, it takes so much energy.

What's going on?

El can't remember at first, but as she tries to lift her head and feels the pain flare along her neck and across her shoulders, memory rushes in with sickening speed.

*Hands grabbing at her, Dustin pushed to the ground, sharp crack of gunfire, **Papa...***

Panic quickens her breathing, grief not far behind – *god, **Dustin*** – and El opens her eyes, her heart pounding. The world spins around her with nausea-inducing dizziness, but El can see well enough to take in her surroundings. And it's almost enough to actually make her sick.

The room she's in is not much bigger than the cell she used to be

thrown in for punishment and El can feel the tiled walls closing in on her, dark and foreboding. A single dim lightbulb is recessed up in the ceiling, it's light weak and diffuse. And it's *freezing*, with little to no heat in the room, a problem made worse by what El's wearing – or, rather, *not* wearing. Because sometime while she was unconscious, someone stripped her of her clothes, leaving her in only her bra and underwear.

Tears prick her eyes, hot and stinging, and El's lower lip trembles as she tries to fight down the sickening wave of fear that swells within her. She closes her eyes, eyelids screwed shut, and shakes her head, hair crunching as her head rolls against the hard tile beneath her. No, no, this can't be happening, Mike *promised*, and-

El gasps. *Mike*. A sob chokes out of her, body wracking with the force. El swallows hard, forcing the tears down into her stomach. *No, please stop, I can't*.

El reaches for Mike, searching out along the connection that binds them, reaching out for the Void that will take her to him...

...And lets out another sob when *nothing* happens. *No, no, please, Mike! Where's Mike?*

But it's like the Void's never existed and, for the first time in over two years, the connection between her and Mike is gone, severed.

Desperation sends her heart racing and El forces herself to roll over onto her hands and knees. She needs to see Mike, needs to have him hold her, to feel his arms around her tight and warm, to hear his voice in her ear letting her know everything's going to be ok because he's got her and he'll never let anything happen to her....

But the room spins wildly around her and El barely makes it to the door before her whole body heaves, nausea ripping through her. She hasn't eaten in hours, so there's nothing but bile in her stomach, but that doesn't stop her from being sick, acid burning up her throat as her body heaves. Tears carve hot tracks down her cheeks and nose and El raises a weak arm to bang against the door. She tries to push, tries to reach into her powers for the strength that has always been a thought away, and *nothing happens*.

“Please,” she whispers. “Please, I need...” But she can’t get the words out, doesn’t even have the right words for the depth of her need. Instead, she crumples, body shaking violently with both tears and cold, and feels hope crumble along with her.

El comes to at the feel of hands, hot and large and rough, grabbing her by the arms and hauling her up. She cries out and struggles against the force that pulls her. The motion sets off another wave of dizziness and El fights to keep from being sick again, swallowing hard against the nausea that rises in her throat.

She opens her eyes, moaning with the discomfort, and looks up. Two men she doesn’t recognize hold her between them. “It would be best if you don’t fight this, girl,” one of them says.

But the words set off panic, heart pounding and breath stealing, inside of her and El struggles all the harder. “No, please,” she says, voice slurred, head shaking. Her feet scrabble for purchase against the tiled floor as they drag her – anything to slow them down, to *stop* them. But it’s hopeless and El can’t stop the tears that roll down her cheeks. Above her, fluorescent lights pass in dizzying progression and El looks away, the light piercing her eyes.

El casts her gaze around, despite the roiling nausea, taking in every detail she can – lab rooms on the other side of clear glass windows, shuttered in half-darkness; equipment along the walls; plastic sheeting walling off hallways. But none of it tells her *where* she is.

Her captors drag her through an open, double-wide doorway and then El’s being thrown into a chair. Crying out, all but screaming, she struggles and squirms against the hands that are now grabbing her by the wrists and ankles and feels the all-too-familiar feel of leather and metal strapping her to the chair, a feeling El thought buried deep in her past.

A hand flashes past her face and, on instinct, El lunges forward, teeth latching on. She bites down, teeth breaking flesh, and tastes the

familiar metallic heat of blood blossom on her tongue.

Someone cries out with pain. “Stupid bitch!” And then a hand – the same one, a different one, El doesn’t know – streaks in front of her, knuckles coming in contact with her cheek as someone backhands her across the face. Pain explodes along her cheekbone and El feels the skin split open, blood beginning to drip down her face, as her head wrenches to one side, neck pulling sharply.

An instant later, El feels fingers around her throat, slamming her head against the high back of the chair. “Bitch fucking *bit* me!”

“Just hold her still while I finish strapping her in.”

“Not a problem.” The fingers around her throat tighten and El gasps – or tries to, airways cut off as pain squeezes along the length of her neck. Her heart begins to pound madly, panicked at the inability to breathe, and El tries to wriggle from the bonds holding her, but she’s held tight. Her vision blurs, white spots exploding against the backs of her eyes, and El feels the distant sensation of leather across her forehead, pressure tight against her skull as she’s completely and totally bound to the chair.

“There, got her. Let go, now.”

Then, suddenly, the hand lets go and El sucks in precious oxygen, coughing and spluttering, tears dripping down her face. El looks up, sees the two men. One of them, the one with the bleeding hand, stares at her, lips twisted with an angry grin. Tall, sandy blond hair, tan skin, eyes raking over her. El’s skin crawls, stomach turning at the way he’s looking at her, and she wants to curl into herself, hide herself from his gaze, dark with an intent that triggers a primal fear deep in the back of her mind. She’s never, *ever*, been ashamed of her body, never been given a reason to be, but now, watching this man watch *her*, shame pools hot in her stomach, making her feel guilty and dirty.

“I trust she is secure, now?”

The voice is like ice and El freezes along with it. *Papa*.

The two men step aside, and Papa – *no, not Papa, Brenner* – fills El's vision, standing tall and calm, dressed in a dark suit. The look on his face is mostly neutral, a small smile tugs at the corner of his mouth, but El knows, just *knows*, that he's angry.

"Gave us a bit of trouble," one of the men, the uninjured one, says. "But she's secure."

"Good, leave us, then."

El closes her eyes, not wanting to watch as the two men leave. Fresh tears spring to her eyes and El's lower lip trembles. She would give almost anything to be able to open her eyes and be *anywhere* but here.

Beyond her closed eyelids, El hears the sound of a chair scraping against the floor, like nails on a chalkboard, and then the rustling of fabric, the creak of the chair, as someone settles into it.

"Look at me, Eleven."

Eleven. It's been months, almost *years*, since anyone's called her by that name, so long that she could almost forget it ever happened. But El knows she can't keep her eyes closed forever, and so she opens them, looking through tears that swim in her eyes at Brenner – *never Papa, never again.*

"That's a good girl," Brenner says softly, small smile turning menacing. "You've been away for so long, Eleven. I've missed seeing you grow up."

El wants to speak, but she knows the any words that come out will become weapons to use against her, so she holds her tongue. Instead, she just stares at him and wishes she could throw him across the room. He would fly through the air, slam into the wall, then El would float him into the air, choke him, watch him gasp for air, before snapping his neck, the crack filling the air with the most satisfying sound...

Something in her face must give her thoughts away and Brenner just shakes his head. "I'm afraid your abilities won't work for a little

while longer.” He reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out an empty syringe. “Before we brought you here, we gave you a neuro-suppressor, a drug I helped develop to control someone like you. Now, don’t worry, it’s not permanent – we can’t have that. You must remain useful.” He slips the syringe back in his pocket and pulls out a Polaroid photo, El can tell from the shape and white backing. “But, that doesn’t mean we don’t have other means of controlling you.”

Brenner holds up the photo and turns it around. For a moment, El’s not sure what she’s seeing but then it hits her: Dustin, lying face-down on her living room floor, blood pooling around him, skin pale, *too pale*, eyes all but closed, hand out stretched, like he’s reaching for something.... El sobs, Dustin’s name spilling from her lips.

Brenner sighs, turning the photo so he can look at it. “How your friend must have suffered while he died, bleeding out slowly, suffocating in his own blood. We could have been merciful, Eleven. But he needed to serve as an example, as a *warning*.”

He reaches into his jacket pocket once more, pulling out a small stack of photos – not Polaroids, but black and white pictures, showing them to El like flash cards. They are pictures of her and her friends walking home from school; of her and Hop sitting on the front porch in the dim twilight while she chides him for smoking; of her and Mike standing in front of the police station after their first fight, him holding her close while they kiss.... “We are watching them, Eleven and if I do not check in – if no one from this facility checks in on a regular basis, what happened to your little friend will happen to the rest, but worse, much worse.” Brenner stands up and leans over so that he’s eye-level with, El, face inches from hers. “Do you understand, Eleven?”

Sobbing and feeling powerless, hate and fear churning within her, El nods as best she can.

Brenner stands and smiles. “Good girl,” he says. “Now, since your abilities are, shall we say, unavailable, there’s not much we can do for a few more hours at least. But, we can use the time to reestablish a baseline. Before that, though, we must clean you for the scans-”

“No, please!” El cries. The words – “clean you for the scans” – were

the words they would use before they shaved her head back in Hawkins Lab. But she can't, she *can't* lose her hair. It's stupid and childish – there are so many other things to worry about, things that are way more important – but this is one step too far for El. Because her hair makes her feel pretty, because Mike *loves* her hair and she can't.... “I'll do whatever you want, I promise, but please, not my hair, *please*.”

There's a satisfied shadow that passes over Brenner's face and El knows she's given him even more power over her. But Brenner nods and El takes the small victory in whatever way she can. “Very well, I suppose it doesn't matter too much for the moment.”

And then it's a dizzying array of tests, drugs pumped into her body to numb her, keep her disoriented – “to keep you from running.”

Over the next several hours, her powers come back in slow drips and it's like trying to reach through a wall. She destroys some inanimate objects, levitates others, and, in the back of her mind, tries to reach out for Mike. But she's not strong enough, too disconnected from her power.

Hours later, she feels faint and the blood that trickles down her nostril is real. Exhaustion pulls at her, beckoning her down to its unconscious depths. She doesn't even fight, can barely even respond, as she's dragged back to the cold cell she first woke up in.

But, lying on the floor again, El feels sleep elude her, her mind racing. Images flash in her head – first, the picture of Dustin, dying as he lays on the floor, then the others in similar poses, similar conditions, lying dead, blank eyes, blood everywhere. El cries – again, still, both? – and curls up the best she can, still cold, still dizzy, still captive.

She reaches out for Mike, through the connection that feels like it's just out of reach, even though she's tired, so tired, and so weak.

But the Void is locked away and so is her freedom.

El wakes in a fit of panic, breath caught in her throat, still tender from the man's fingers wrapped around her neck. If everything hurt the day before, she's in utter agony today: exhausted, body feeling like she's been battered in a storm, and cold, so cold, fingers and toes numb, her shivers distilled to minor tremors – that's bad, isn't it? To be so cold yet not trembling from it?

The dim light above her illuminates the tile walls of her cell, off-white and dingy. El swoons as the walls close in and she rushes to close her eyes, to keep the feeling from overtaking her.

A rustling sound pierces through the door to her cell a moment later – probably what woke her up – and El cringes. She doesn't know how long she's been asleep, but clearly long enough that they're ready for her again.

The door opens and El, again, has no strength to fight what's coming. They feed her, which doesn't stay down due to the nausea from the drugs they force into her, and she throws the food right back up. They then give her something to help with the nausea, a small kindness in a sea of misery and mistreatment, which helps her keep food down.

And then more tests, more experiments. And, finally, the Bath, or at least a facsimile of it, to contact the Demogorgon.

El realizes, right then, that Brenner must not have been watching her too closely because the Demogorgon is dead and she hasn't needed the Bath in over two years, which brings the next realization: she's more powerful than they know.

It takes everything El has to keep her face neutral, to keep the hope from her features. But she doesn't keep back the whimper that escapes when the water, warm compared to what she's experienced, hits her skin. Then she's submerged and the world goes still.

She doesn't hunt for the Demogorgon – it's long dead, the gate to the Upside Down firmly closed, and El has no desire to go mucking around with *that* again. No, she goes to find Mike.

It's like moving through a fog, hazy blackness all around her instead of the clear, sharp nothingness. But she finds him – sitting on what looks like the Byers' couch, looking so pale and sad it damn near breaks her heart – but it's *Mike* and El almost wants to cry she's so relieved.

So she does the only thing she knows how: she reaches for him.

Mike feels untethered, has since he did a sweep of El's house only to find her missing, and the days after her kidnapping go by in a lost blur. He spends the night at Will's house with the rest of the Party, his mom more than happy to let him after hearing the news about both Dustin *and* El, and waits for Hopper to get back with *something* that will help find El.

But Hopper doesn't show up the day after and Mike goes home with a sinking heart that is desperate to hope for something, *anything*. Because Mike can't live without El again. He did it for almost a year after knowing her for only a week. How's he supposed to go on after spending almost a year and a half with her? How's he supposed to live without her smile or the way she arches her eyebrow at him when she thinks she's being cute or the way she kisses him, lips sure and inviting with no hesitation, full of love and acceptance and passion? How's he supposed to live without his best friend, the girl of his dreams, the woman he's fallen in love with?

Nancy tries to talk to him, his parents avoid him, and the rest of the Party just look at him with sad, pitying gazes. The deep wellspring of anger that Mike's gotten so good at controlling begins to surface once again and it mixes with the sadness and shock that course through him, leaving him feeling sick and tired and wanting to cry. But there are no tears, just emptiness and the phantom sensation of where El once was, like the ghost of an amputated limb.

Hopper does come back, though, with what he says is something and Mike realizes he doesn't want to hope, doesn't know if he can. Because he can't get his hopes up only to crash – he won't survive.

But then Hopper asks about El's ability to talk to Mike with just her mind and Mike finds himself explaining the depth of the connection between him and El, things neither of them have ever shared with anyone, things that would have, *should* have, remained private if none of this had ever happened.

Mike's in the middle of explaining how the connection he has with El has gotten to the point when he can feel her even when she's not around when everything changes and tilts his world back right side up.

Mike!

Mike gasps, breathing El's name, and then the world goes dark around him. He can feel himself still sitting on the couch, somehow remaining upright, as the Void envelops him.

Mike squints against the darkness. There's a fog that surrounds him, a black fog that's thick like smoke, and he can't see more than a couple feet. But Mike can feel El, can feel her for the first time in almost two days, and that's all that matters.

"El?" he calls out, turning to see where she is. "El, where are you?" Mike knows he sounds desperate, but he just doesn't care.

"Mike." His name is said with a tiny, meek cry and Mike turns, heart in his throat. He needs her, *right now*, and-

Mike sees her and his breath catches, like he's been punched in the chest. There's a lot going on, almost too much to focus on. Because the first thing he notices, like the stupid teenage boy he is, is that she's not wearing much – just her bra and underwear. And, under normal circumstances, that would be *all* he could focus on. But then it hits him: if she's not wearing the rest of her clothes, that means someone took them from her and a surge of anger, hot and vile, rises inside of him.

There are other things he notices: how pale she is, bright blotches scattered across her skin the way it does when she's cold; the way she shivers and tries to cover herself, arms crossed tightly over her chest; the bruises on her wrists and ankles, the dark, disgusting mark on the

inside of her elbow, the bright bruise on her cheek, swollen with a deep cut across her cheekbone and, worst of all, the bruises around her neck, the shapes of someone's fingers so very clear, like a brand burned into her skin.

"Oh, El," he breathes, tears forming in his eyes, lumping in his throat. Mike opens his arms and starts to take a step towards her, but El lets out a loud sob before he can even get closer to her and launches herself at him. Then, an instant later, she's in his arms and he's holding her tight, so tight, as best he can. She buries her face in his chest, fingers clutching at him, as the sobs wrack her body. It doesn't feel like it normally does, like there's too much air between them or too many layers or *something*, but it's better than nothing and Mike sinks to the ground, pulling El into his lap, wrapping both his arms and legs around her to protect her with the cradle of his body. He's crying, too, he realizes, as he rocks them back and forth.

"I got you, I got you," he finds himself murmuring, knowing it's not true, knowing she's still out there, somewhere where someone is hurting her.

"Mike, I'm so scared," El says with a whimper, words barely audible through her tears. "They said they're going to hurt you if I don't do what they ask. And they killed Dustin, Mike, they *killed* him, and-"

"No, El, no," he says, pulling back so he can force her to look at him. "Dustin's going to be ok, ok? Will found him and called 911 and they got him to the hospital so the doctors could fix him."

"...Really?"

The hope that shines in El's teary eyes just breaks Mike's heart. "Friends don't lie," he whispers, leaning forward to press his forehead against hers.

The words set off a fresh round of sobs and Mike finds one of his hands coming up to cradle the back of her head, fingers weaving in her hair, thumb rubbing soothingly against her scalp as she trembles in his embrace. "We're coming to rescue you, El," he says after a long moment. "We just need to figure out where you are, but we're coming."

El shakes her head. “No, *no*,” she says. “They’re watching, Mike. They’ll hurt you if you try.”

“I don’t care, El, and I know Hopper doesn’t, either. None of us do. We’ll be careful, but we’re going to come find you.”

After a long moment, El nods. “Ok. Please, hurry,” she says, sounding so scared – and she must be, if she doesn’t put up a fight about the rest of them putting themselves in danger for her.

Ask her how many there are. And if there’s any signs of where they might be keeping her. It’s Hopper’s voice, piercing through from the other side of the Void.

Mike repeats the question for El and she sighs. “I don’t know,” she says. “But I’ll pay better attention.”

Mike nods. “Let me know, ok?”

El nods. “I will.” She takes in a deep breath. “Mike?”

“Yeah?”

El looks up at him, tears shining in her eyes, exhaustion and stress carving lines into her face. “Kiss me?”

El doesn’t need to ask twice. “Ok,” Mike all but whispers. He leans in and captures her lips as easy as breathing. Again, it doesn’t feel the same, but neither of them care. El sobs against his lips, her hands coming up to cup his face, fingers digging into his skin and Mike feels his breath hitch in his throat and kisses her all the harder, trying to pour everything he feels for her into the meeting of his lips to hers.

The kiss draws to a close and Mike doesn’t want to let it, but El pulls back. “I love you,” he says.

“I love you, too,” she says in return. “Stay safe, Mike. And don’t be stupid.”

Then El *pushes* him and Mike returns to his body with a sharp gasp, feeling bereft and cold. He’s back in Will’s living room, all the colors too bright and crisp, with too many voices clamoring for his

attention.

But Mike is reeling. There're too many things he's feeling right now, like a dam has broken inside of him, and Mike needs air. *Now*.

He gets to his feet, brushing aside the hands that reach for him, and stumbles towards the front door. Seconds later, cold, late winter air hits him in the face and Mike gasps, the air burning in his lungs. He makes it a couple of steps before he collapses on the front porch, knees giving out on him.

And, before Mike knows it, he's crying, body heaving with sobs, grieving for something he can't name and hoping, *praying*, that El comes back to them, to *him*.

Nancy watches her brother stand up and walk out the front door of the Byers' house, stumbling like he's drunk. *It's shock*, Nancy realizes.

There had been a moment of confusion when Mike spoke El's name, looking like he was anywhere but here, before everyone realized that Mike was talking to El. A palpable wave of relief swept through the room – El was ok, *thank god* – and no one made a sound as they watched Mike, getting their first, curious glimpse of the connection between El and Mike. And Nancy watched closely as Mike's mouth moved, like he was talking, but not enough that she could make out the shape of the words. And there was no way she could miss the way his eyes misted over, tears pooling in the corners.

Then, what felt like no time later, it was over and it was like something *slammed* Mike back into his body.

"What'd you hear, kid? What did she say?" – "Mike, are you ok?" – "Is El ok?" – "Where is she?"

But it was like none of them were there. Mike gasped and, seconds later, got to his feet, Nancy watching him go.

Now she feels frozen, mouth agape, but it only lasts a second and

then she's getting to her feet, too. "I'll check on him," she says, all but running after her brother. She shuts the door behind her in time to hear the unmistakable sound of crying and Nancy's by his side in an instant, sitting next to him on the edge of the front porch and taking him into her arms.

Mike just *melts* against her, arms wrapping tight around her, head buried against her shoulder as he sobs. Nancy finds herself with a hand supporting the back of Mike's head, hair thick beneath her fingers, while she holds her brother as he lets go. Nancy blinks away her own tears, her lower lip wobbling against the sorrow that sweeps over her. It's not fair, she realizes, not fair that this is happening to Mike, that the world is always taking from him in ways that are cruel and heartless, asking him to give without giving back in return.

"Shh, it's ok," Nancy murmurs, holding Mike close. "I'm here, Mike. I got you." Somehow, though, Nancy's words make Mike cry even harder, so she just holds him, rocking them back and forth, remembering when they were little, when he would crawl into bed with her after a bad dream and they would snuggle and Nancy would hold him tight, her strong form against his shivering one, until he fell asleep. He grew out of it eventually, staying in his own bed at least, but the memory is a strong one and it punches Nancy in the gut with its intensity.

How long has it been since anyone's been there for Mike the way she's here for him now? How long since someone held him and told him everything would be ok? Does El do that for him, hold him and love him the way he deserves? God, Nancy hopes so and the need to get the younger girl back grows all the more intense, burning inside of her with a ferocity that surprises Nancy.

Mike's tears have soaked through her sweater and, by the time he pulls back, there's a giant wet spot on her shoulder. "I'm sorry," Mike croaks out, face blotchy with the evidence of his tears. "I'm so sorry."

"Hey, *hey*," Nancy says, grabbing Mike by the arm. "It's ok, yeah? It's ok, everything will be ok."

Mike shakes his head. "But you didn't see her, Nancy. They're *hurting* her and she's out there" – his body swivels so he can point to

somewhere behind the Byers' house – “and she's all alone and we don't even know *where* she is and-”

But something in Mike's movements niggles at Nancy's brain and she feels the world go still around her. No, it can't be...can it? “Mike, where's El?”

Mike stops and looks at her like she's an idiot. “Nancy, I don't *know*. God, do you think if I knew I'd be sitting-”

“Where's El, Mike?”

Mike stands, frustrated and looking like he's ready to run just to get away from her, but she won't let him, not this time. “Dammit, Nancy, I told you-”

Nancy springs to her feet. “Where is she?!”

“*There!*” Mike roars, spinning to point in the direction he had earlier.

Elation buzzes through her and Nancy laughs, smiling. She lays her hands on Mike's shoulders and squeezes. “Mike, I know how we're going to get El back.”

As it turns out, Mike can *sense* where El is. It takes a while and some trial and error (spinning him around to disorient him, to double check to make sure he's not orienting to where he had before out of muscle memory), but they have a direction, a bearing. There's nothing to tell them how far away El is, but at least they know which way to point themselves while they look.

So, Jim takes the bearing they got from Mike, goes to the maps Owens gave him, and gets to work. It doesn't take long for Jim to narrow the choices down to one. He sighs, not in relief, quite, but... resolve, maybe – determination. Because he knows where El is.

“Ithaca,” Jim announces. Now it's just a matter of getting there.

“You mean, like New York?” Nancy asks.

“Yep,” Jim says, tone short. It’s at *least* a 10-hour drive, 10 hours more hours of El being held by Brenner, doing god-knows-what to her....

“Well, what are we waiting for,” Jonathan says. “Let’s go get her.” Around him, Nancy, Steve, and all the kids begin chattering with excitement.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Jim says, holding up his hands. “You are not coming with me.”

“Uh, I am,” Steve says. “You need back up, Hop.”

“And I know how to handle a gun,” Nancy says, tone just as fierce.

“And I can talk to El,” Mike chimes in. “And I can help take care of her. I need to go with you.”

There’s a lot of arguing that makes Jim’s head hurt, but eventually they decide on this: Steve, Nancy, and Mike are all going with Jim. (“You will follow orders at all times and you do not lay a hand on a gun. Is that clear, Mike?” – “Crystal, sir.”) Joyce and Jonathan will take the rest of the kids out to the cabin for the night, just to make sure if the warning El gave Mike about Brenner’s men watching them is true, since the cabin is easily defensible. The cover story, which Joyce will back if pressed, is all the kids are sleeping over at her house, Nancy is helping Joyce watch over the stricken Party, and Steve and Jim are off looking for leads on where to find El.

Really, it’s as good as it’s going to get.

“Alright, give me a couple of hours to get some supplies together and then we head out. I will meet you back here,” Jim says before he presses a quick kiss against Joyce’s mouth and heads out the door.

God, he hopes he doesn’t regret any of this. But, regardless, there’s one thing he does know: he’s getting his daughter back and heaven help anyone who gets in his way.

El comes out of the Bath and delivers the performance of her life: lying to Brenner, telling him she couldn't find the Demogorgon, that it might be hiding or she's not strong enough, and can she try again in a little while?

"Of course, Eleven," he says and ushers her on to other, more exhausting tests.

But this time, El's paying attention, looking for clues, counting the number of distinct faces. She's not sure if Brenner's actually watching her family and friends, so she doesn't try to do anything directly to her captors. Besides, she's dizzy and disoriented, an effect of one of the drugs they keep injecting her with, leaving El unable to stand up straight, much less *walk*, even if her life depended on it.

Aside from Brenner, El counts 10 distinct people – all men – and waits until she's back in her cell to relay the information to Mike.

"We're coming," Mike tells her once she reaches out for him again, stronger now than she's been in a couple of days, able to reach out to him without the help of the Bath. It takes all her energy, though, and as unconsciousness pulls her into its sweet embrace, there's only one thought on El's mind: Hop and Mike are coming to rescue her and soon, she'll be home.

The drive to Ithaca is long, too long. The weather sucks, forcing them to go slower than anyone would like, and it's not until almost 4 in the morning when they're pulling up to a metal gate. Just beyond is a non-descript building, tucked in the outskirts of town, and Mike just *knows* El is in there. He can feel her, so, so close, and it burns along every inch of his skin, knowing that she's there but just out of reach.

But, with the proximity, the connection between Mike and El is stronger, clearer, and Mike knows he'll be able to find wherever she is inside the building.

“Ok, here’s the plan,” Hopper says, killing the engine and turning around in the driver’s seat to look at Nancy and Mike. Steve leans in from where he’s sitting in the passenger seat.

“I will go in first, Nancy right behind me, and then Steve bringing up the rear. Mike will stay in the car. I’ll have my radio on me so you can let me know if El tells you anything we need to know. We know how many of them are in there and, once we’ve dealt with all of them, we’ll grab El and get the hell out of here. Any questions?”

Mike raises his hand. “I want to go in with you.”

Hopper sighs and all but rolls his eyes. “One, that’s not a question, Wheeler. And, two, you’re not coming in.”

“But, I’ll stay out of the way, I promise!” Mike knows he’s whining, which probably doesn’t help his case any, but he *needs* to go in, needs to get to El.

“No, this is non-negotiable. I’m not above handcuffing you to the car, is that clear?”

Hopper’s voice has no room for argument and Mike huffs a sigh. “Fine, I’ll stay in the car.”

There’s a long moment while Mike and Hopper stare at each other – *probably trying to see if I’m lying* – before Hopper sighs. “Alright, let’s go. Mike, we’ll be back soon with El, ok? Everything will be fine.”

And then, armed and loaded, the others take off, leaving Mike alone in the car.

Worry and resentment swirl inside his stomach, making him jittery, and his leg bounces uncontrollably. He should be in there, looking for El, *helping*. He’s not stupid, he could be useful.

A gunshot echoes from inside the building and Mike freezes, every muscle ready to launch himself out of the car. He hesitates for a moment, fear and adrenaline burning in his veins, before he gathers his courage. El is in there and she *needs* him. Hopper’s not going to like this, but...*Screw it*.

There's a kind of clarity to Jim's thinking that he hasn't experienced in quite some time, a battle sense he hasn't needed to cloak himself in: everything slows and Jim just exists in the moment. His service weapon is back at home, but he's not unarmed; he holds another hand gun that he bought from a pawn shop, safety off, fully loaded, and though he doesn't want to kill anyone (*besides Brenner*), he's ready to defend not only himself, but the teens behind him and the daughter locked away in the building in front of him.

The door leading into the small facility is unlocked and the three of them slip in quietly. They begin to sweep the facility, clearing rooms one at a time, and, somehow, it's almost a surprise when they run into the first two people.

Jim immediately rushes into action, punching one of them in the face, dropping them to the ground, and, as he turns to deal with the other one, he stops, watching as Nancy points the small revolver she's holding, hands steady, at the second man. "Hands where I can see them," she hisses and the man stops whatever he was doing, hands stopping mid-motion and Jim notices the weapon at his belt.

Everyone freezes for a moment before Jim comes over and knocks the other guy out. There's a quick flurry as Jim searches the unconscious men for weapons, finding them and unloading them, before they're moving on and Jim's starting to think maybe this won't be so bad.

But, of course, when a gunshot rings out moments later, Jim knows he's jinxed it.

The journey from the car into the building is a blur to Mike, his heart pounding as he climbs the fence and crosses over and through the front door.

He hears more gunshots in the distance, jumping at every bark of a bullet, but ignores them the best he can. Nothing is more important than finding El.

Mike moves through the building on instinct, the thread connecting him and El tugging him along. Fluorescent lights flicker menacingly, casting shadows in empty, sterile labs and across complicated machinery. It's a building made to be filled with people and the emptiness is haunting.

Mike sees movement out of the corner of his eye, but when he turns his head, there's nothing there. He takes a few seconds, staring intensely down the hallway leading away off to his left, but he's moving away moments later, need pulling him down hallways....

...Until he's standing in front of a large door, latched shut, locked from the outside. Mike licks his lips, mouth dry, and then he's unlocking the door, pulling the heavy door open with a grunt of effort. It's dark inside the room, darker than the hallway, and Mike squints to get a better look inside and....

She's there. *El's* there and for a moment, Mike can't move.

She's laying in the middle of the floor, curled up in a tight ball with her back to the door, shivering with full body tremors that are barely noticeable. She's still wearing only her bra and underwear and her hair's greasy, slightly matted from days without soap. But she's there and nothing has ever been so beautiful.

"El," he breathes and Mike immediately goes to her, dropping to his knees in an instant in front of her. He reaches for her and pulls her into his arms, one hand wrapping around her hip while the other slides under her shoulders. Her weight slides easy into his embrace, onto his lap, and Mike presses her close. He can feel the tears welling in his eyes, gathering in his throat, and he tries to hold them back. But El's in his arms and he can't contain them.

It takes him a moment to realize that El hasn't stirred once and, except for the way her body trembles in his arms, she's been unresponsive. Then Mike notices how *cold* her skin is and he's kicking himself for being a selfish idiot.

Mike shucks off his jacket one shoulder at a time, unwilling to let El go completely and shivering as the cool air hits the skin of his bare arms from the T-shirt he's wearing, before he wraps her in the article of clothing. He settles onto the floor fully, legs folded in front of him, El situated in the cradle made by his legs, and tries to rub the warmth back into her body, hands running back and forth over her back and arms to stimulate the blood vessels.

El whimpers, like she's scared and in pain, and Mike's breathing hitches with a sob. "Shh, it's ok," he murmurs. "I'm here. I got you."

El shifts in his arms, curling into his embrace, and her head nuzzles against his shoulder, under his chin. One of Mike's hands goes to the back of her head to keep her right there. He's never thought about how perfectly she fits against him, head nestled just under his, and now that he knows, he's never going to be able to forget and he's always going to be forever grateful that he's gotten the opportunity to realize it.

Mike lets out a shaky breath and tilts his head just enough to press a soft kiss to El's forehead. Her skin is soft beneath his lips and Mike can't help the tears that escape from beneath closed eyelids. God, he loves her, *so much*, and he wants to tell her that every day for the rest of their lives. And he never, *ever*, wants to let go of her.

So he sits there, hearing the distant sounds of fighting – shouting and gunfire – but he's frozen in place, desperately trying to share his warmth with the woman he loves, and the fighting seems so far away.

A few moments later, El takes in a deep breath and lets out a whimpering moan. Her head shifts where it lays against his shoulder. "Mike?"

Mike lets out a quiet breath. "It's me, El. I'm here."

The sound El makes is heart-breaking, somewhere between a sob and a laugh. "You're here."

Yes, Mike's here. And he's never going anywhere ever again.

The first thought that comes to mind is *warm*, so warm after days of being cold.

Then El breathes in and she knows.

Mike.

He's holding her close, arms tight around her, and El wants to cry, happiness and relief warring with the fear and sadness that have been her constant companions for the past few days.

Off in the distance, she hears what sounds like fighting, punctuated with gunshots, and she shivers. "Where's Hop?" she asks.

"He's with Nancy and Steve," Mike says. "They're taking care of the Bad Men. Then we'll go home."

The thought of home – safe, warm, happy – brings a fresh round of tears to El's eyes. "Yes, home," she sighs.

But then there's the sound of someone cocking a gun and El forces herself to open her eyes. Her blood's still laden with the drugs they've been using to keep her disoriented and the world spins around the edges of her vision. But El has no trouble recognizing the figure that stands in the open door to her cell: tall, sandy blond hair, tan skin.

The man who looked at her like she was a piece of meat. The man who choked her.

He stands there, smiling, the expression manic and horrific, twisted with anger and fear, a gun that he points at them held in both hands. "Well, look what we have here," he says, voice tight through gritted teeth as he walks into the cell.

El feels Mike's arms tighten around her and god, she loves him. "You won't hurt her," Mike says, a declaration, twisting to try and shield her.

The man chuckles. “Oh, I won’t hurt her,” he says, aiming the gun at a spot just above El and righteous anger flares within El as she realizes he’s aiming at Mike’s head. “You, on the other hand...but maybe I’ll make you watch, first, as I fu-”

He doesn’t get a chance to finish his sentence. With nothing more than a thought, El picks him up and slams him against the wall. The tile cracks with the force, his feet dangling several inches off the ground. With all the strength El has, she gets to her feet, adrenaline buoying her, Mike’s jacket falling from her shoulders as she keeps the man pinned against the wall. Her eyes go to his throat and she *squeezes*. His hands follow, fingers clawing at the skin that surround his cut off airways. His face turns red, then purple, and then he chokes out a word: “Please.”

Anger explodes inside El – he’s asking for *mercy*? – and it’s enough to break El’s tenuous control. A snapping sound fills the room with an ominous crack as she breaks his neck.

A wave of dizziness passes through El and she wavers on her feet, but Mike’s hands, warm and strong, catch her by the shoulders. “Holy crap, El,” Mike breathes and she feels him shift to pick up the jacket that fell to the floor moments before he’s placing it back on her shoulders, hands helping her arms through the sleeves.

“M sorry,” she breathes, feeling like a monster for killing, for not regretting it...for *liking* it.

Mike pulls her close and El turns, letting him hug her. “For what? He totally deserved it.”

El doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry – everything’s too confusing – but the world rushes back in and El can still hear the sounds of fighting, shouting, and gunfire. Hop’s out there, with the others, and she needs to go to them. She grabs on to Mike’s shirt, holding him tight (because if she lets go, she’ll fall). “Help me to them,” she says – telling, not asking – and looks up at him.

Mike looks back down at her, emotion shining in his eyes, a complicated mix of sadness and pride and worry. But he nods. “Ok.”

It's a goddamn Mexican standoff, one Jim's pretty sure he's losing.

He's barricaded behind an overturned gurney, a flimsy protection at best, and leans against one end of it. Nancy's at the other end, having traded her revolver for the shotgun Steve had been carrying. And Steve's between them, slumped against the gurney, mostly laying on the floor, while his hands put pressure on the bullet wound in his thigh.

Fuck, this is not going how I hoped.

Jim grips his gun tighter in one, sweaty palm, and leans out once more. A quick scan shows 5 of them, including Brenner, who's looking crazed in a way that's more concerning than anything Jim's seen in a while, and Jim takes aim, firing off a shot a split second later at one of the men who's ducked behind a rolling cabinet, head peeking out from the side. From the sound of the bullet ricocheting, Jim knows he's missed.

He ducks back behind the gurney and spares a glance over at Nancy. Her face is pale, but her expression is strong, determined, and Jim thinks she'd make a damn fine cop if she ever wanted to. "How you doing over there, Nancy?"

"Fine," she grits out, hands clutching the shotgun tight, stock pressed against her shoulder. "You got a plan, Hop?"

The answer to that question is a distinct "maybe". Jim's got a pretty good idea of where everyone is and, if he could create a distraction, he could draw them out, give Nancy room to fire, and-

The sound of a body slamming against the wall with a sickening crunch, followed shortly by a cry of pain, cuts off Jim's train of thought. He peeks above the gurney to see that one of the men is lying on the floor, blood rapidly pooling beneath his head, and the rest, including Brenner, are looking over off somewhere to Jim's right. He turns to see what they're looking at....

It's El and Jim could cry at the sight of her. Mike's with her, arm tight around her waist as El leans against him. She's got Mike's jacket on and not much else. She looks tired and drawn, ugly bruises have blossomed on her pale skin, and there's a shiner on her cheek that surrounds a deep cut. Hot anger roars inside of him – what have they done to her? – but there's not much time to linger on it.

A breath later, the rest of the men are flying through the air, colliding with the wall with the same deathly crunching sound, bodies sliding to the ground – everyone except for Brenner.

“Eleven,” Brenner says and it's all he has time for before El pushes him with her powers. He lands against the wall, hovering inches off the ground, limbs spread-eagle as she pins him there.

Jim stands, slowly, and looks back and forth between his daughter and Brenner. El's face is too pale, the effort of using her powers too much, but she's leaning against Mike like she can draw strength from him, and Jim figures that's not outside the realm of possibilities.

“Eleven, stop,” Brenner says. “You don't know what you're doing.”

“No, you hurt my friends. You hurt *me*,” El says, voice deadly quiet. The look that passes across her face makes Jim shiver with its intensity.

The sound of fabric ripping draws Jim's attention back to Brenner and his shirt is hanging open, exposing pale flesh for half a second before long, claw marks explode down the length of his torso, skin splitting, blood bursting from where El's gouging him with her powers. Brenner's mouth opens in a silent scream.

“El, stop. Don't do this,” Jim says. He knows what it is to get revenge, knows the dark hole it can pull a person into, and he doesn't want that for El. He *can't* let her do this.

But El doesn't listen and then Brenner's gasping for air, choking. “Please, think about what you're doing,” Brenner says, pleading, face turning red. “You can do great things, Eleven. I can help you.” His eyes swing over to meet Jim's gaze. “Don't-”

Jim raises his gun and, with skill born from long hours of training and practice, fires one last shot. Brenner's head snaps back and a trickle of red slides down between his eyebrows, down the bridge of his nose.

With a cry, El lets go and she slumps against Mike, who now has both arms wrapped around her, holding her close. Brenner's body slides to the ground, but Jim doesn't care, barely even notices, and he goes over to Mike and El. There's no extracting El from Mike's embrace, so Jim pulls both of them close, hugging them tight, and feels one of El's hands twist in his shirt as she grabs onto him. Both kids lean against him and Jim can feel the way they tremble against him, against each other. And Jim just holds on even tighter, cradling his family close to him, and says the only words they need to hear:

"Let's go home."

The adrenaline has long worn off, but it's a long way back to Hawkins.

Once the threat is gone and El is saved, it doesn't take long to bundle the 5 of them in Hopper's police car. They do a quick sweep of the facility, looking for clothes for El, and, when nothing turns up, they grab whatever blankets they can find. Nancy also takes the opportunity to help patch Steve up as best she can, but it's something that's going to have to wait until later, until they can think of a story to explain the bullet wound in his thigh.

Mike's not worried, though. He knows they'll think of something. What matters is that Steve is ok from where he lays asleep, stretched out in the back seat because of his leg.

Nancy's taking the first shift of the drive back, Hopper asleep in the passenger seat next to her. And Mike and El are piled in the very back, swathed in blankets. El shivers against him, still wearing his coat, and Mike's not sure if it's from cold or exhaustion or some combination of both. He knows she's drained, though, as she dozes

next to him, head pillowed on his upper arm as she lays in the circle of his embrace. She'd leaned against him the entire way out to the car, a sign of her exhaustion, and Mike wishes they had food for her, to help her regain her strength. But at least she's resting somewhat comfortably now and that's better than nothing.

El's legs tangle with his beneath the blankets, one foot hooked over his calf while the other is wedged between his ankles, and Mike pulls her closer. It feels like it's impossible to tell where she ends and he begins, like a physical representation of all the ways his life is entwined with hers.

There are no words for the depth of the relief Mike feels that El's back with him, safe, where he can hold her, touch her, look at her. It's dark in the back of Hopper's police car, but dawn is creeping up on them and there's just enough light for Mike to be able to see her. There's still bruising on her neck and face, cheekbone still cut, her hair still greasy and a bit matted, but Mike doesn't care – she's still the most beautiful person he's ever seen.

Mike stares at El, unable to look away, drinking in the sight of her, until exhaustion pulls him under, too, the swaying of the car lulling him to sleep as he holds El close.

He wakes some time later, sun a bit higher in the sky – maybe a couple of hours later, but Mike's not sure. He's still holding on to El and, if anything, they're even closer. Sometime in his sleep, Mike shifted, the arm El's not using as a pillow worming its way beneath the jacket El's wearing, seeking the warmth of her skin. His palm is pressed against the middle of her back, the tip of one finger brushing against what he assumes is the elastic band of her bra, and his bare forearm is resting in the naked curve of her waist. A fierce blush creeps across his cheeks and neck, embarrassed. He's too close and she's not wearing enough clothing and it's so inappropriate, touching her like this when she's resting, especially after what she's been through. Mike begins to move his arm out from under the jacket, slowly so as not to wake her.

"Don't," comes the sound of El's whisper.

Mike freezes, hand spanning her ribcage, skin soft beneath his palm.

He looks down at her, eyes wide, and sees her looking at him with a soft, sleepy expression. “El, I’m sorry,” he whispers. “I didn’t mean to. I was asleep and-”

El slips her hand from where it’s resting against his chest and presses a finger against his lips. “I like it,” she says, just as softly. “It’s nice, helps me remember this is real, makes me feel safe.” Her finger leaves his lips and then her hand’s cupping his elbow, pushing his arm back where it was just moments before. “There, perfect.”

Despite the ordeal of the past few days, Mike lets out a huffed chuckle, lips pulling up with a small smile. “You’re something else, El Hopper.” He leans forward and presses a soft kiss against her lips. “I missed you. I’m glad you’re here with me.”

The words bring tears to El’s eyes and Mike’s heart squeezes painfully in his chest as he thinks of what the past few days must have been like for her. If it’s been hard for him, it must have been absolute *hell* for her. “Me, too,” El breathes out. “I love you.”

Mike’s hand presses hard against where he’s touching her and he nudges her closer until their foreheads are touching. “Love you, too.” He rubs a gentle circle against the skin of her back with his thumb. “Go back to sleep, El,” he says, seeing the dark circles under her eyes. “I’ll be here when you wake up.”

Her lip wobbles and it makes Mike want to cry at how scared and lost she looks. She’s fought so hard to move past everything that’s happened to her, all the trauma and horrible abuse; it’s not fair that she should be here again, fighting for happiness and safety, and he knows the next however many days are not going to be easy. There’s going to be no forgetting this, not for a long time. “Promise?” she whispers.

The word wraps tight around his heart and Mike almost can’t breathe. He gulps, sucking in a shaky breath. “Promise. Always.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Up next, dealing with the aftermath and the fallout, tons o'snuggles, and more Karen Wheeler.

16. Mar 2, 1986

Notes for the Chapter:

Ok, I lied: there's no Karen in this chapter.

But there are snuggles o'plenty!

Mar 2, 1986

The sun has just set when Jim pulls into his driveway. Exhaustion pulls at him like a lodestone, a heady combination of relief that he has El back, coming down from the battle high back in Ithaca, and having spent the better part of the past 24 hours in the car.

Next to him in the passenger seat, Nancy Wheeler begins to stir, the slowing of the car pulling her from the light doze she's been under since they crossed the state line. "Whassit?" she murmurs, sounding just as tired as Jim feels.

"We're back in Hawkins," Jim says, keeping his voice quiet, though the thunk of the parking brake is loud enough to make up for it. He kills the engine and turns to look behind him. Steve's still sleeping, looking uncomfortable scrunched up in the backseat. And it's been hours since Jim heard anything from Mike and El in the very back.

With a sigh, Jim reaches out and places a hand on Nancy's shoulder. "You ok to help me get Mike and El inside?"

Nancy blinks and gives her head a fierce shake. "Yeah, yeah. I'm fine." She reaches down to unbuckle her seatbelt, but Jim squeezes her shoulder, causing her to look back up at him.

"You did good out there, Nancy. Thank you for helping me get El back." The words are nowhere enough to express the gratitude he feels, but they'll have to do.

Nancy smiles, face softening. "Of course," she says. "There was never any question." There is a depth in her eyes that makes Jim sad and he knows it's because she had to grow up too much and too fast over the past couple of years.

The two get out of the car, walking around to the back, gravel crunching underfoot. Jim opens the tailgate, ready to get the two younger teens into the house...

...And just stops at the sight of Mike and El. The two are curled up tight beneath a mountain of blankets. Mike's back is pressed against the back of the passenger bench seat, a wadded up blanket serving as a pillow. El's turned towards Mike, face buried against his neck, her head resting on his shoulder. It's clear that Mike has his arms around her, but Jim can only see one of his hands, which is resting on the back of her head, fingers interwoven between strands of hair.

"Cute, aren't they?" Nancy says, catching Jim off guard. "I'm glad they're sleeping. They've been through a lot. Especially the past few days."

Jim nods, noticing the circles under Mike's eyes and remembering the bruises on El's skin. "That they have," Jim sighs. "You mind waking them up? I want to make sure everything's ok in the house before we get them in."

"What about Steve?" Nancy asks, gaze jumping over to the back seat of the car. The look on her face is concerned and Jim can't blame her; Steve *did* get shot.

"Once we get Mike and El inside, we'll go to the cabin so you can help Joyce and Jonathan get the rest of the kids back to her house. I'll get Steve to the hospital and then let the station know *something*."

The smile that crosses Nancy's lips is wry and jaded – entirely too cynical for her age. Jim can so fucking relate. "Not the truth though, right?"

"Never the truth," Jim says. "They couldn't handle it." Leaving the kids in Nancy's capable hands, Jim heads into the home he hasn't been in since Thursday and he's scared about what he might find. Dustin Henderson was *shot* in his living room. Surely there's still a mess to clean up. And that's to say nothing about the other cops and paramedics who were trampling in and out of the house for what felt like hours Thursday night.

So imagine Jim's complete and utter surprise when he crosses over the threshold to find his house looking spotless. He gapes as he looks around – kitchen tidy, foyer scrubbed clean, carpet completely absent of blood – and wonders at the goddamn miracle that's taken place in his house.

Jim stumbles into the kitchen and immediately notices the lone piece of paper on the kitchen table. He goes to pick it up and immediately recognizes Joyce's handwriting. "Hope I got everything back in the right place. –J," the note reads, Joyce's single letter signature done in her looping cursive. Jim doesn't know how she did it, how she managed to get everything spotless and tidied up. But, regardless, he's so, so grateful.

God, I love her.

The sensation of someone gently shaking his shoulder is what pulls Mike out of sleep. He wants to resist – he's warm and, while not entirely comfortable, El's in his arms, just as warm and soft and safe. He pulls her closer against him, feels her shift and nestle further into his embrace, and starts to sink back into blissful sleep.

But the shaking sensation continues and is soon joined by a voice – Nancy's. "Mike, wake up." More shaking. "C'mon, we're home."

Mike opens his eyes and looks up to see Nancy standing just outside the car under the open tailgate. The sky behind his sister is draped in twilight and Mike recognizes the sights of the street El's house is on. Mike shifts his weight, pushing himself up on to the elbow El's laying on, and looks down at the young woman in his arms. El's still asleep, her legs still tangled with his, her hands resting in loose fists against his chest.

"Mike, we should get her inside," Nancy says.

Mike spares a glance up at his sister, nodding at her words. "Can you give me a minute? Alone? To wake her up."

“Yeah, ok,” Nancy says. Her voice is soft and sympathetic. “I’ll go check on Hop.”

Nancy disappears from view and then it’s just Mike and El (*he elects to completely ignore the soft snores coming from Steve in the backseat behind him*).

Mike looks back down at El and just takes a moment to drink in the sight of her. Her eyes are closed, eyelashes brushing against the curve of her cheek. The side of El’s face that’s injured is pressed against his arm, so all Mike sees is smooth, unbroken skin, gently flushed with warmth, full lips parted just so, a lock of hair draped across her jaw and tickling her chin. El looks like a princess, beautiful and ethereal – like out of a fairy tale, waiting for Prince Charming to wake her up with a kiss. Mike knows better, though. El’s no damsel-in-distress; she’s smart, resourceful, and a damn superhero who’s saved his ass more times than he can count, to boot.

Still, though, waking up with a kiss?

Mike smiles. His free arm is still layered in between his jacket and El’s body, his palm still pressed against the middle of her back, skin soft beneath his touch. Though he’s loathe to do it, Mike sacrifices the feel of El’s skin against his own. He slips his hand out from underneath his jacket and shifts the blanket enough so he can shake his arm completely free. With just the slightest glide of his fingers against her cheek, Mike pushes the errant strands of hair away from El’s face, tucking them behind her ear. He traces the shell of her ear and feels her shiver against him, an involuntary response.

Emboldened, Mike continues the caress, letting his fingertips trail along the edge El’s jaw until he’s gently grasping her chin between his thumb and forefinger, the rest curled against the underside of her jaw. Mike leans in, tilting El’s chin up just enough so he can press his lips to hers. He resists the urge to groan, but only just. Her mouth is soft against his and so, so warm and he luxuriates in the sensation.

It doesn’t take El long to stir, to wake up...to *respond*. She sucks in a sharp gasp through her nose and releases it a second later in what Mike can only describe as a breathy moan. The sound sends a shiver down Mike’s spine, heat spreading across his skin, pooling low inside

of him. God, he loves that sound and he's willing to do whatever it takes as long as she keeps making it.

She's kissing him back a moment later, mouth opening against his, all soft and inviting. His hand leaves her chin to tangle in her hair, while one of hers presses against his cheek, her thumb tracing along the line of his cheekbone. Despite the heat that makes him breathless and dizzy, the kiss is slow, almost lazy. But it is also deep – so, so deep – and all-encompassing. God, how is it always like this every time?

The kiss draws to a long, lingering close and both of them are breathing hard, hands clutching each other. Mike opens his eyes in time to see El do the same, their gazes meeting like gravity pulling them together.

El smiles, eyes wide, lashes fluttering. “Hi,” she says, voice pitched with sleep and breathy in a way that's thrilling, almost illicit. Mike wants to wake up to that every day.

“Hey,” he says, his own voice rough with emotion, low and raspy. El bites her lip, leaving indentations of teeth marks in the flesh, and Mike wants to kiss them away. He finds himself leaning back in, eyes beginning to slip shut, but the sight of the cut on her cheek, still surrounded by a nasty bruise, catches his eye and Mike immediately sobers.

Mike lets out a sigh. El's still looking at him, gaze soft and happy, and he hates to ruin the temporary peace. But he knows he has to. “We're back in Hawkins,” he says. “Hop and Nancy went to make sure your house is ok.”

It takes El a second to process his words, but Mike knows when it happens. Moreover, he *sees* it, sees the soft happiness flicker as memory rushes in. The corners of her eyes tighten and she looks tired in a way she didn't a moment ago. Mike feels like the world's biggest heel. “We're home?” El asks, sounding small and sad.

Mike presses a soft, quick kiss against El's lips. “Yeah, El. We're home.”

El wakes to the deliciously overwhelming sensation of Mike kissing her, lips soft, fingers pressed with gentle firmness along the lines of her jaw, legs still tangled together. She immediately knows she always wants to wake up this way, feeling safe and warm and loved, and wonders how she got so lucky to be able to experience this.

But the real world, as it always does, makes itself known and El feels the frisson of tired tension, heavy and weary, tighten along every inch of her skin. A kaleidoscope of horrible images swims in the forefront of her memory and El gulps against the emotions they stir inside of her.

But, she's home according to Mike and that's no small thing. So it's with a strange combination of reluctance and eagerness that El sits up, leaving the warmth of Mike's embrace.

Everything hurts. She's sore and tired and drained, despite spending almost the entire car ride home asleep. Dizziness pulls at her as she sits up and she holds out a hand to steady herself. She can feel Mike's presence behind her, hears him sitting up. He doesn't touch her, but he's still close, still nearby in case she needs him. El loves that, loves that Mike protects and cares for her without being overbearing. It's *respect*, she realizes, something El's still getting used to experiencing.

El pushes the blankets aside and shivers as the cool March air hits her bare legs. She's still only wearing Mike's jacket over her underwear and she wraps the jacket tight around her, hugging the fabric to her torso.

"Here," Mike says from behind her and, a moment later, she feels the weight of a blanket being draped over her shoulders. El grabs the ends of the blanket and holds them close, letting the blanket shield her from the cold. It takes her a bit, but El manages to extract herself from the back of the police cruiser. The gravel of the driveway bites into the bottoms of her feet, all cold sharpness, and she hisses, toes curling with a cringe.

"You ok?" Mike asks as he stands next to her.

“Gravel’s cold and sharp,” El says, looking up at him.

Mike winces as he looks down at her feet. “Yikes, sorry about that. C’mon, let’s get you inside.” He extends an arm in invitation and El goes to him, letting his arm encircle her shoulders as she leans against him, drawing strength and serenity.

Together, they make the short, yet somehow long walk up the driveway and into the house. Hop and Nancy are standing in the foyer, talking in low tones, their voices immediately hushing as they see Mike and El.

Hop comes over, a small, sad smile on his face, and looks between both Mike and El. “Ellie, did you want something to eat or do you want to shower first?”

“Shower,” El says, the word rushing out of her mouth. Yes, she’s hungry, but she doesn’t think she’ll be able to enjoy eating with the remnants of the past few days still clinging to her skin. El makes to move upstairs, but panic grabs at her heart. She turns to Mike, reaching out to grab one of his hands; the blanket falls open, but she doesn’t care. “Mike, will you...?” She’s not sure exactly what she wants, not sure of anything, really, but she wants him close *somehow*.

Mike smiles, corners of his mouth just barely curling up, and he nods. “Whatever you need, El. I’m not going anywhere.”

It’s not exactly what El’s asking – not that she knows what she’s asking for – but it’s good enough for the moment. “Ok.” El lets her hand slip from his grasp and turns to Nancy, who’s looking at her with tears shining in her gaze. “Thank you,” she says to the older girl.

Nancy gives her a watery smile and steps closer, arms open in invitation. El goes to her, blanket falling to the floor entirely, and hugs Nancy, feels her thin arms surround her in gentle comfort. “I’m glad you’re ok, El.”

Is she? Is El ok? Physically, maybe, but in every other way? El’s not sure.

Without another word, El slips from Nancy’s embrace and goes

upstairs, wondering if she'll ever be ok ever again.

Mike watches El go upstairs, stomach twisting with worry. There's something *off* about El, something that sets alarm bells ringing in the back of his mind.

A heavy hand comes down on Mike's shoulder, yanking him from his thoughts, and Mike turns to see Hop standing in front of him. "Mike, can you watch over her for a few hours? I gotta get Nancy to the cabin, let Joyce know what happened, and then get Steve to the hospital."

Mike cringes, remembering Steve in the backseat, still with an untended bullet wound in his thigh. But Hop's request is almost insulting. "Like I'd be anywhere else," Mike says. "I'll stay as long as she needs me."

Hop lets out what Mike hopes is a sigh of relief and nods. "Make sure she eats something, ok? I'm not sure what we have here, but I'm pretty sure we have bread and peanut butter, at least. No delivery; we don't need the risk right now before I've had time to lay down a cover story."

"Got it," Mike says. "I'll figure something out."

"And Mike?" Hop says, voice gentle, yet serious.

"Yeah?" Mike asks, intrigued by what Hop has to say.

"Be careful with her," Hop says. Mike feels anger rise at what sounds like an accusation, but Hop holds up a hand and Mike bites his tongue. "I'm not saying you're going to do anything, or that you'll hurt her. In fact, I *know* you won't hurt her. I just wanted to say..." Hop sighs. "She's had a hard few days and her emotions are probably everywhere right now. She needs you to there for her. Do you understand?"

Mike nods. "Yeah, I get it." And he does. He remembers the days

after both of Will's ordeals, remembers the way trauma influenced the way Will reacted to things and to everyone, remembers how jumpy he was and how quiet he would get.

Hop nods. "Good. We'll be back in a few hours, though I'm sure Joyce might want to stop by later. I'll try to keep the rest of your friends from coming over, though. I'm not sure if El can handle that right now."

Mike doesn't know if Hop's right about that, but he doesn't want to argue. "If they come over, I'll ask El if she wants to see them. If she doesn't, I'll tell them to go home."

Hop smiles. "Thanks, kid." He turns to Nancy. "C'mon, let's get going."

Nancy gives Mike a smile as she and Hop move past him. "Good luck, Mike. Take care of her."

Then, the door's shut behind him and it's only him and El in the house. For a moment, Mike's frozen, not sure what to do with himself. Then he remembers food and thinks that foraging around the kitchen is probably not a bad idea.

But Mike only takes a few steps in the direction of the kitchen before he hears El calling out for him, the sound of his name mired in panic and need. Suddenly, food is the last thing on his mind and, without a second thought, Mike races upstairs.

El can't help the sigh of relief that escapes her as she enters her room. She can hear the sounds of Hop talking downstairs, his gruff voice punctuated by sounds of Mike's higher, raspier one. But, El lets those sounds fade away as her room envelops her, all comforting smells, soft carpet, familiar pictures, and *hers*.

Studiously avoiding both the vanity mirror and the mirror on her closet door, El shuts the door behind her-

-And why does her heart jump at the sound of the door latching?

Shaking her head, El rolls her shoulders, hands going to the open edges of Mike's jacket, and then the article of clothing is on the floor. She quickly strips herself of the bra and underwear she's been wearing the past few days and tosses them in her hamper with more force than strictly necessary before grabbing her bathrobe. A few seconds later, the terrycloth fabric is cinched tightly around her waist and El makes the quick trip across the hall to the bathroom.

The light of the bathroom is harsh compared to her room and the tile cold, imposing. Gulping, El steps in and can't help but catch her reflection in the mirror, cringing at what she sees and wanting to be sick all at the same time. Her hair is greasy and slightly matted, lying in limp locks around her face. The cut on her face is red and scabbed over and the surrounding bruise mottles her skin. With trembling fingers, El brings one hand to her neck and pulls aside her bathrobe, exposing her throat and the bruises there. The motion shifts the hem of her sleeve, the fabric pooling around her elbow, revealing still more bruising around her wrist.

God, she looks *horrible*.

With a shaky sigh, El turns around and turns on the water for the shower, needing very badly to scrub away all the horribleness of the past few days.

But when she closes the door and hears the click of the door latching shut, panic grips her heart and squeezes, sucks the air from her lungs. Her head spins and then she's back *there*, back in her cell. Fear crawls into her belly, spreads through her limbs, and El wants to be sick. With trembling hands, El grabs the doorknob, to open it, but she can't seem to turn it, can't seem to get a good grip. She reaches out with her powers instead and, a split second later, the knob spins hard and the door flies open.

El tumbles out into the hallway, panting, trying to get her breath back and failing miserably, tears spilling down her cheeks. Mike, she needs Mike. *Right now*.

Mike bounds up the stairs, taking them two at a time, and turns down the hallway once he gets to the top. He spots El immediately, standing outside the door to the bathroom. He notices how hard she's breathing, how pale her skin is, the tears that trail down her cheeks.

"El!" he cries out and he's by her side in an instant. El turns to him and just launches herself at him, immediately burying her face in his shirt, and Mike wraps his arms around her. "El, what's wrong?"

"I-I don't know," she says into his shirt. "I can't...." El lifts her head and looks up at him. "Can you stay with me? Please?"

Mike's confused. "Stay?"

"While I'm in the bathroom."

Mike puts the pieces together – the bathrobe El's wearing, the sound of the shower going – and can't help the intense blush that crawls up his neck and floods his cheeks. Jesus, she's asking him to stay in the bathroom with her while she *takes a shower*. Mike gulps and wills himself not to be a stupid teenage boy about this. Because El's looking up at him, panic and fear etched in her features, looking to him for support and strength. And Mike can't deny her *anything*. "Show me what you want me to do," he says.

El lets out a sigh of relief, sniffing a bit, and Mike's heart clenches. She grabs his hand and pulls him into the bathroom, just inside by the door. "Can you just...sit, right here? And don't close the door."

Wordless, Mike nods and lowers himself to the floor until he's sitting with his back against the door. He looks up at El, who's just watching him intently, like she can't move until she's sure he's not going anywhere. Their eyes meet and, for a moment, the whole world freezes, fades away, leaving only the two of them.

Then the moment breaks and Mike watches as El turns towards the shower. She pulls back the curtain and stretches out a hand to test the temperature. There's a bit of fiddling with the knobs, another temperature check, then her hands go to the knot of her robe. Blush

returning with a vengeance, Mike immediately closes his eyes and turns his head so he's facing the wall across from him. He can't stop himself from listening, though – the rustling of fabric, the soft sound of bare footsteps against tile, then the slide of the shower curtain, the change in the cascade pattern of the water as someone steps under the stream....

Mike swallows hard. His girlfriend – his *very beautiful* girlfriend – is standing mere feet away from him, taking a shower, *naked*. His imagination goes into overdrive, mind racing and heart pounding, and he can't stop himself from picturing her, standing beneath the showerhead, water cascading down her body, caressing every inch of skin....

Mike draws in a sharp, steadying breath and bites the inside of his cheek. *This* is what he meant about being a stupid teenage boy. El went through hell over the past few days and he's sitting here thinking about her naked in the shower. This is *so* not the time.

And especially not after Mike hears the way El's breathing hitches as she showers, the shaky exhales followed by stuttering gasps. *She's crying*, Mike realizes and his heart twists in his chest.

Mike sits there, keeping vigil, as El showers and washes away the past few days. Mike's not sure how much time passes, but, eventually, the water shuts off, and then there's only the sound of breathing with the occasional drip of water. The shower curtain rustles and Mike makes sure his eyes are still closed.

A few more moments pass, filled with the sounds of El drying herself off, and then El speaks. "Mike, you can open your eyes."

Mike gulps. "You're not still...naked, are you?"

El lets out a small giggle and Mike didn't know how happy that sound could make him until this moment, until he spent almost 3 days worrying for her life and safety. "No, I'm not."

So Mike gets to his feet, opening his eyes...and promptly groans. Because while she's not naked, El's wearing only a towel, which isn't much better, really, and, *holy fuck*, is she beautiful. Condensation

shines on her skin, flushed from the warmth of her shower, and Mike can't stop staring at her bare shoulders, collarbones fully exposed. Her hair is mussed from being towel-dried, remaining moisture pulling down and stretching the curls, and Mike wants to run his fingers through the strands. He barely even notices her injuries, he's so blown away.

El tilts her head to one side, confusion marring her features. "Mike, what's wrong?"

It's this question that makes Mike realize he's staring. "Nothing," he stutters. "It's just – you're beautiful."

El looks down, smiling shyly, before she walks towards him and hugs him, her arms sliding between around his torso, between his arms and his body. Mike gulps again and, for a moment, he doesn't know where to put his hands. But, like the pull of gravity, his arms find their way to wrap around El, one across the middle of her back, the other across her shoulders, hand resting on her bare skin. "Thank you," she says, the words cloudy with tears.

Mike holds her tighter and presses his cheek against her wet hair. "What for?" he murmurs.

"For coming to get me," she chokes out. "For being here. For *everything*."

Mike slides his hands across her back so they're both resting on her shoulders, pulling back so he can look down at her. "Always, El. I'll always be here." Then his hands are cupping her cheeks and he's leaning down to kiss her. She pushes up into the kiss, breath hitching, and Mike can feel the tears that escape and trail down her cheeks as they land against his thumbs. His throat feels thick with emotion and he wishes he could take all her pain away. God, what he wouldn't give to be able to do that.

The kiss draws to a close and Mike pulls back. "C'mon. Why don't you get dressed and I'll figure out something to eat, yeah? Hopper said there's probably bread and peanut butter, but I'm sure we can scrounge up something."

El smiles, but the expression is tired and sad. “Ok,” she says. “I’ll see you downstairs.”

El comes downstairs dressed in a pair of PJs and together, Mike and El eat peanut butter sandwiches in the kitchen before heading over to the couch in the living room to wait for Hop to come home. Mike lays down and El snuggles up next to him while he holds her close, his arm wrapped around her to keep her from rolling off the cushions (or, it would have if she hadn’t been lying half on top of him).

They fall asleep, still exhausted from the fear and worry and turmoil of the past few days, her head pillowed on his chest, his heartbeat pressed against her ear, one of his hands wrapped around her hip, the other resting on top of hers where it rests just beneath his sternum.

This is how Jim finds them when he gets home.

The past several hours feel like a blur. Between getting Steve to the hospital and talking with the guys at the station, having to come up with a bullshit story that *nobody* believed but nobody challenged... Jim’s exhausted, mentally and physically.

So when he walks in through his front door and finds Mike and El asleep on the couch, her snuggled into his side, her leg thrown over his, the two of them holding hands, Jim doesn’t have the heart *or* the energy to wake them up, to get El up to her own bed.

Instead, Jim grabs a blanket from the closet and drapes it over the couple. He makes a quick call to Joyce to let her know Mike’s staying at his house, in case Karen Wheeler calls over at Joyce’s looking for her son, before he trudges upstairs and falls face first onto his bed, falling asleep before he can even take his shoes off, calmed with the knowledge that his daughter is home and safe...and that the bastard who hurt her is dead, can never hurt her again.

Yeah, Jim sleeps like a goddamn baby.

The doctor discharges Steve a few hours after he gets to the hospital, leaving him with stitches in his thigh, a bottle of pain pills, and a cane. “You’ve suffered some pretty severe muscle trauma, Mr. Harrington,” the doctor says, an older man with a balding pate and thick, black-rimmed glasses. “Use the cane to keep some of the pressure off the muscle.”

So, Steve uses the fucking cane. He’s wearing his jacket and shirt from earlier, but hospital scrubs have been exchanged for his jeans, which are ruined beyond repair. He feels like a fucking misfit, but it’ll have to do until he can call someone to pick him up and take him home.

But Steve doesn’t call anyone, doesn’t even stop by the payphone. Instead, he hobbles his way through the hospital’s corridors and ends up outside of the room Dustin is still recovering in. He stands outside the door, looking in to where Claudia is sitting, a novel in her hands, her chair a foot away from where Dustin is still sleeping. A “medically induced coma” is what the doctors told him days ago, something to let Dustin’s body rest and recover from the trauma. But it doesn’t look right, Dustin lying there. The kid’s always so full of life and laughter, bouncing energy and infectious smiles.

No, it’s not right, Steve thinks. But the bastards who did this are dead, a thought that brings too much comfort.

Steve’s ok with that.

Taking in a deep breath, Steve knocks on the doorframe, watching as Claudia jerks her head in his direction. She smiles, though, the second she spots Steve, all warm and motherly and Steve loves that he’s been all but adopted by the Henderson family. “Steve,” she says, voice quiet. With her facing him, Steve can see just how *tired* Claudia is, her face drawn, dark circles under her eyes, looking too haggard and older than she actually is.

“Hi Claudia,” Steve says. “Mind if I come in?”

“No, of course not, dear,” she says. And when Steve hobbles into the room and Claudia spots the cane, she gasps. “Steve, what happened?” She’s up in a rush, coming over to help him to a chair.

“It’s ok, Claudia,” Steve says. “I just got hurt helping Jim look for El.”

Claudia gasps again. “Oh, you found El? Bless that poor girl, how scared she must have been. What happened to her?”

Steve swallows and prepares the lie he and Jim agreed upon on the way to the hospital. “She tried to get away from the people who hurt Dustin and got lost in the woods. She’s at home now, recovering. Banged up and bruised, pretty cold from being outside a few nights during the winter, but she’s ok.”

Claudia sighs, relieved. “I’m glad she’s ok,” she says before her face turns fierce, a protective mama bear. “If I ever get my hands on the people who did this to my Dustin and that poor, sweet girl, I’ll....”

“Don’t worry, Claudia,” Steve says. “We got them, ok? They won’t be able to hurt anyone else.”

Palpable relief sweeps over Claudia and she calms. “Good, that’s good.”

Steve looks over at the bed where Dustin’s lying asleep. “So, how’s Dustin doing?”

“Oh,” Claudia breathes. “The doctors pulled him out of the coma they put him in earlier today. He woke for a few minutes, and I got to talk to him before he fell asleep again. They say I’ll get to bring him home tomorrow, if he’s progressing ok.”

Steve nods and looks back over at Claudia, his heart going out to her with how tired she looks. She’s had to do this all on her own, has had no one to lean on, and it makes his heart hurt. “Hey, Claudia,” Steve says, “Why don’t you go home, get some rest? If you’re going to bring Dustin home tomorrow, I’m sure there’s some things you’ll want to get ready and you need some sleep. Whaddya say? I’ll stay here, keep an eye on Dustin while you get some sleep.”

There’s a sheen to Claudia’s eyes as Steve finishes speaking that had

him squirming in his seat. "Are you sure, Steve?"

"Positive. I'll make sure he has everything he needs, ok? But Dustin's going to need his mom well rested when he gets home. Go, I'll be fine, I promise."

There's a half beat of stillness before Claudia leans over and pulls Steve to her in a fierce hug. "God bless you, Steve Harrington. We are so lucky to have you." She presses a kiss to his cheek and Steve swallows hard to keep from blubbering like a baby. But he hugs her back, feels the warmth of her embrace cradle him, and tries not to think about how long it's been since his own mother hugged him like this.

(it's been hard, since steve decided to become a police officer, not that it had been easy before that. he sees his parents once a week for dinner since he moved out into his own small, kinda shitty apartment and the distance that has been there for years between him and his parents has grown into a fucking fathomless chasm. but steve has a new family, one he made himself. he spends more time over at jim's place than his own parents' and almost as much time over at dustin's. there're weekends spent with nancy and jonathan and the rest of the kids, hugs from joyce, lunches and patrols with jim, movie nights with the party. his life is full now, so full, more than he could have ever imagined. but it hurts, still, when he thinks of his parents, thinks of the absence, the 'could have beens', and wonders what he did to make his parents not love him the way parents should.)

Steve helps Claudia get her things together and then it's just him and Dustin, who's still asleep. Steve stretches out his injured leg and waits, sitting with his thoughts in a way that once upon a time would have made him anxious and antsy.

Steve thinks about the past few days, about finding out that Dustin had been shot and El taken; the panic of waiting to find out if Dustin would survive; the anguish of not knowing where El was or how she was doing; the rush of finding her, saving her and getting injured in the process; the heartbreak of seeing what had happened to her; the relief of seeing Mike and Jim reunite with El.

It hits Steve, in this moment, that everything's going to be *fine*. Oh, sure, there are new scars, new traumas to fold in and grow around.

But everyone survived to live another day and Steve finds himself tearing up moments before he starts to shake, sobs rippling through him. He doesn't have to hold it back anymore, *can't* hold it back anymore. He cries silent tears, sitting there in a really uncomfortable hospital chair, and thanks whatever higher power that might be listening that everyone's alive.

It could have been minutes or hours that passes before Steve hears Dustin make a noise. It's a thick gasp, almost a cough, then a spoken word. "Mom?"

Steve hurries to scoot closer to the bed, completely ignoring his own injury, and reaches out to grab Dustin's hand. "Hey, little man," he says. "Your mom went home to get some sleep."

Dustin turns his head and looks at Steve, eyes alert, but tired. "Steve?"

Steve smiles so hard, it feels like his face is going to break. "Yeah, man, it's me. How're you feeling?"

"Like I got run over," Dustin says. Panic fills his gaze, forcing his lips to twist in a frown. "El, the Bad Men, they got her, they-"

"She's safe," Steve says, cutting Dustin off. "They took her, but we got her back, ok? She's home with Mike and Hopper. Brenner's dead, Dustin. He won't be able to get her ever again."

Dustin closes his eyes and Steve can see from the way his lower lip wobbles that Dustin's trying to hold back tears. "Good, good," Dustin says, trying to play it cool. "Is...is everyone ok?"

"Everyone's fine," Steve says, squeezing Dustin's hand. "You and I have somewhat matching bullet wounds, though."

Dustin's eyes fly open. "What?" he says, as much energy as he can muster in his voice.

"I mean, I got shot in the leg, not the chest," Steve says, keeping his voice light and soft as best he can, but he knows all his emotions are bleeding through. "But, we'll both have cool scars to show the chicks, amiright?"

Dustin laughs, sounding too old for his 14 years. But Steve knows Dustin has been through more than most adults have – all of the Party has – and it makes Steve a bit sad, that they had to grow up too soon – that everyone did, Steve included. “If you say so, man,” Dustin says. “You’re ok, though?”

“Yeah, gotta lug around a cane for a few days, but I’ll be fine,” Steve says. He lets out a chortle at the look on Dustin’s face, his face twisted in curiosity that he’s trying to hold back. “Dude, just ask me.”

“Tell me everything that happened,” Dustin says, the words all but exploding from him.

Steve laughs. “Ok, ok, sure. You want anything, first? Water, jello, bad hospital food...?”

Dustin smiles. “I’m ok. *Just tell me!*”

Even injured, Dustin is the king of dramatic declarations and Steve smiles back. He’s going to be ok – Dustin’s going to be *ok* and Steve can barely contain his own happiness. “Ok, well, for a couple of days, not much happened. But then Hopper....”

Notes for the Chapter:

It might be the wine, but the Dustin/Steve scene had me almost crying with happiness. I love that relationship *so much*. It's just so precious.

Ok, next time, Karen's making an appearance, more of the fallout, and more of the Party (hopefully, but you never know with me). I plan for these things, but the words always get away from me and I end up writing way more than I think. There are 7 more major story beats I want to hit and I always think those are going to be contained to one chapter (like I thought this would be), so I'd say there are at least 10 more chapters left in this bad boy (wouldn't be surprised if it were more than that, considering how often I get ~off plan~).

17. Mar 3 - Mar 7, 1986

Notes for the Chapter:

Another extra long one to fulfill one of my promises from the previous chapter. I'm sure y'all don't mind, yeah?

Mar 3 - Mar 7, 1986

It takes a few nights for the nightmares to start.

El sleeps peacefully that first night home, curled up next to Mike on the living room couch. They wake up the next morning, completely content and absolutely unembarrassed to be waking up wrapped around each other, and wonder briefly at the blanket that now covers them. But then they smell the unmistakable aroma of breakfast cooking in the kitchen. "C'mon, you two lovebirds," Hopper calls out to them. "I hear you moving around in there. Breakfast's almost ready."

Mike and El give each other shy, yet giddy smiles before they climb off the couch and join Hopper in the kitchen, where they sit down to eggs, bacon, and pancakes. All three of them are still weary, still healing, and there's a shadow that hugs all of them close as they eat. Mike manages to make both El and Hop laugh, though, when he asks to try Hop's coffee and actually takes a sip, face twisting in disgust at the strong bitterness. It's a moment of levity in an otherwise quiet meal, conversation sparse as they eat.

After breakfast, Hopper takes Mike home, but not before Mike and El say their goodbyes and Mike promises to come over later that day, once he's had a chance to go home and shower and change clothes, and maybe they can go see Dustin in the hospital, since El hasn't seen him since everything went to hell a few days ago. El likes the sound of all those things and only then is willing to let Mike go.

Plans made, Hopper finally takes Mike home. But instead of a quick drop off and driving away once Mike's out of the car, Hopper parks in front of the Wheeler house and gets out with Mike.

“What are you doing?” Mike asks.

“Gotta talk to your mom, Mike,” Hopper says. “Rumors about what happened Thursday are swirling around Hawkins, so she knows something’s up. I need to tell her something to explain why you and Nancy have been away from home for so long, especially since Joyce said your mom called about you at her house last night and told her you were at my house. So I need to set the record straight. The last thing I need is Karen Wheeler nosing around, mucking everything up.”

Mike gulps. “You’re not going to tell her the truth, are you?” Mike’s gone pale at the thought. Because he really doesn’t know if his mom can handle the truth.

“Of course not,” Hopper says. “What do you take me for, an idiot?”

Matter settled, Mike lets Hopper inside. It’s a relatively quick conversation between Jim Hopper and Karen Wheeler, Hopper giving her the official cover story, Karen at first concerned about the whereabouts of her son, but softening with relief once she finds out El’s ok and that Mike was helping to take care of her.

“Make sure he calls home, next time, though,” Karen says, tone exasperated, lips pursed.

“God as my witness, there’ll never be a ‘next time,’” is Hopper’s dry response, but he understands the worry that only a parent can feel.

So, Mike goes home and showers before reconvening with the Party later to see Dustin, finally awake, in the hospital.

The day’s exhausting for El. She jumps at every shadow, freaks out whenever she’s enclosed in a small room, especially if it’s a bathroom, and cringes when anyone other than Mike touches her. It’s a day of panicked breathing and heart pounding terror that leaves her drained and tired.

But El’s second night back at home is mostly sleepless, despite her exhaustion. Her mind races at a million miles an hour and, while she can fall asleep, she can’t stay that way. She catnaps, catching sleep in

half hour chunks, not long enough to dream, not long enough to rest.

The next day, Dustin comes home from the hospital, but the rest of the Party ends up at El's house and El catches a quick nap while the others watch a movie, her head pillowed on Mike's shoulder. Joyce comes over in the evening, Steve comes over with Hopper after work, Jonathan calls Nancy over and, suddenly, it's a *thing* – Joyce and Hopper making dinner, conversation and laughter filling the air despite Dustin's noticeable absence, and El feels happy, happy to be home, happy to be back with her friends and family, happy to be alive and free. She goes to sleep that night, happy that she survived, that she made it back, that everything's going to be ok...that *she's* ok.

But El's not ok.

Not even close.

It starts in the Void.

El doesn't remember coming to the Void, doesn't remember how she got here. There's nothing but inky blackness all around her, an aimless trip, one without a search, a goal. Why is she here? What is she looking for? Is she even looking for anything?

Wait...is she dreaming?

This happens sometimes. She'll wake up in the Void, carried there by her subconscious. But there's usually something that's drawn her there: a place she's thinking about, something she's trying to avoid, someone she wants to see. Often, it's Mike, sometimes sleeping, sometimes living through echoes of his own memories. El never remembers them, just left with impressions of feelings. She thinks this is one reason she knows Mike so well, can read him as well as

she can.

El spins around, soles of her feet dragging across the surface of the water that covers every inch of the ground, creating ripples that extend out like echoes. There's nothing, just blackness, just El alone surrounded by emptiness.

Until there's *something*.

A door, simple and white, square window set just at eye-level, glass pane maybe the size of El's face. It's far away, way off in the distance, but El can see it as clearly as if it were right in front of her.

El blinks and the distance between her and the door disappears. El gasps, heart in her throat, and she sways a little, almost dizzy from the sudden shift. She looks at the door – can't look away, in fact. It calls out to her, entices her with its magnetic pull.

The doorknob gleams, gold reflecting the weak light that surrounds her, and El finds herself reaching for it, arm trembling. Her fingers wrap around the smooth surface, cold biting into her skin-

-A scream drags sharp talons down her spine. A flash of bright white, searing pain. A man, tall, imposing. She kneels before him, begging, no, please no....

El's in a hallway, endless and white. Her feet are cold against the tile, soles softly slapping against the hard surface. She walks.

A shadow flickers out of the corner of her eye. Menacing. *Hungry*.

El turns, heart in her throat. Her skin buzzes with fear.

Nothing's there.

She keeps walking.

"El!"

A voice, one she should know. Does she know it? Or does she wish she does?

El wants to respond, wants to call out. But her voice is gone, mouth open without sound.

She blinks.

And it's cold, *so cold*. Walls press in on her. She can't breathe. El bangs at the walls over and over, hands bleeding, skin bursting open. Blood seeps into the surface, walls drinking what she gives, growing stronger. Her fist lands and the walls swallow her, needy, starving. El cries and pulls, but she's gone, engulfed, suffocated....

Leather wraps tight around her wrists and ankles. A hand touches her cheek. Fingers trail down her chin, between her breasts, searching, wanting.... El twists, tries to get away, eyes squeezing shut. *No, please....*

"You must choose, Eleven."

Her eyes open. She stands in a white room. Papa is next to her, a gun gleaming in his hands. El looks over, tears dripping down her cheeks. Hop and Mike kneel in front of her, hands bound behind their backs.

"No," El whispers.

Mike looks at her with wide eyes, beseeching.

"Mike..." His name is a breath on her lips, a prayer.

A gunshot cracks the air. Blood blossoms on Mike's shirt.

Mike looks at her, confused. "El?"

El looks down, gun wrapped tight in her fingers, smoke pouring from the barrel. *No....*

And she screams.

Safe in his bed, Mike tosses and turns.

Images flash through his sleeping mind – El running down a white hallway; trapped in a room that swallows her whole; strapped to a chair while a menacing figure touches her...

...Standing next to Brenner with a gun in her hands, pointing it at Mike, who's kneeling on the ground, and pulling the trigger....

El's scream is still echoing in Mike's head as he bolts upright, breathing hard, adrenaline burning in his blood.

El needs him.

It's not so much a thought as an instinct and Mike launches himself out of bed, need driving him. He has enough presence of mind to shove his feet into his sneakers and grab a jacket to throw over his t-shirt and PJ pants before he's racing downstairs. Mike doesn't even think to leave a note for his mom as he runs outside to where his bike is.

Mike's feet work the pedals furiously, each stroke carrying him to El. The night air bites at his exposed skin, Hawkins flying by in a blur, but Mike doesn't care about any of that. He has to hurry, has to go faster.

El needs him.

And he's not there.

A scream pulls Jim from sleep in the dead of night. Heart in his throat, immediately awake, Jim's gaze lands on the bedside clock. 1:30 in the morning. What in the hell...?

The lights start flickering, strobing, bulbs crackling with electricity, filaments clinking.

El.

The screams continue and Jim's out of bed and down the hall before

he knows it. His hand feels empty without his service weapon and Jim resists the urge to run back and grab it as he stops in El's open doorway. She still isn't able to sleep with the door closed.

Jim looks in, breathing heavy, and tries to see through the strobing that fills the entire house.

El's in bed, covers tangled around her legs as she thrashes beneath them. Her head rolls back and forth on the pillow, mouth open with screams. Tendons stand out on her neck from the strain and her fists clutch at her sheets.

"El!" Jim calls out, rushing into her room. He kneels on the bed and grabs her by the shoulders, shaking her. "El, wake up! C'mon, sweetheart, you're having a nightmare."

El struggles beneath his grip, her screams raging against his eardrums. The flickering of the lights intensifies and Jim's afraid that the bulbs are going to blow-

-But then El's eyes open. All lights except for El's bedside table lamp turn off in a dizzying blink that leaves Jim feeling unsteady, lurched. His grip on El's shoulders relaxes, but he doesn't let go.

"Hop?" El's voice is quiet, hoarse from screaming, and so, so small.

Jim sighs and settles on the bed, easing himself off his knees. He pulls El against him, relieved when she leans into the embrace. "Yeah, it's me, kid."

Then the sobs start – deep, heart wrenching, echoing in his bones. Jim holds El tight and feels her fingers curl into his shirt. He swallows, throat thick, and does his best to anchor her, to give her his strength. "I'm here, Ellie. I got you."

It takes a few moments El's sobs to subside enough for her to get out words. "Mike," she cries. "Killed him."

"No, no," Jim breathes. He presses a kiss against the top of El's head. "He's fine. He's home, safe."

El shakes her head, but says nothing further.

Jim's not sure how long he sits there, holding El against him as she sobs. It could have been 5 minutes, could have been an hour. But Jim doesn't move, doesn't let go. His daughter needs him and nothing, not even the end of the world, can pull him away.

El stills, sob choking in her throat. "He's here."

Before Jim can ask what El means, the doorbell rings and, a moment later, a voice calls out, followed by the sound of the door slamming shut. "El, where are you?"

It's Mike. El must have opened the front door with her powers. But how did Mike know to be here, right now?

The question still burns in Jim's mind as El practically flies from his side and she's out the door before he can open his mouth to ask.

Jim follows, but stops at the top of the stairs, where he watches as El launches herself at her boyfriend. Mike's dressed like he woke up in a hurry – which he probably did, if Jim had to guess – wearing a tan, nylon jacket over what looks like a Star Wars t-shirt and dark blue flannel PJ pants. But what Jim really notices is the way Mike holds El close, folding her into his embrace so she can burrow into it.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," El says, repeating the words over and over again through her tears.

"I know," Mike says, talking over the mantra. His face is tight, corners of his mouth pinched, like he's trying to hold back his own tears. "It wasn't your fault. It wasn't you, El. It was just a dream, it wasn't real. Hey, it's ok, it's ok. I'm here."

Jim says nothing, just watches as Mike holds her, soothes her, until her sobs are nothing more than an occasional snuffle. Exhaustion pulls at him and Jim has to guess the two teens feel it as well.

So Jim pushes himself from where he's leaning against the wall at the top of the stairwell and clears his throat to get their attention. Mike looks up, meeting Jim's gaze, and tenses a bit. "Hopper, I'm sorry, but-

Jim holds up a hand as he walks down the stairs. "It's too late to

worry now. Your mom know you're here?"

Mike pales at the question and sways as El sags against him. He looks down at the girl in his arms. "El, we should get you back to bed," Mike says, Jim's question forgotten in his concern for El.

"Not without you," Jim hears El mumble and Jim sighs, worry bubbling inside of him. It concerns him, adding up some of the pieces from the past few days, that El can't seem to sleep without Mike nearby. Jim doesn't know what to do about it, but he knows he can't keep letting it happen. Not the least because he knows Mike's parents won't approve. And never mind the fact that, although he knows how much Mike and El care about each other, they're only 14 (soon to be 15), and Jim doesn't want El to be dependent on Mike for her ability to sleep. It's not healthy, not for either of them.

But Mike's already here and Jim knows how cold it is outside. "C'mon, upstairs you two."

Jim steps aside and watches as El pulls Mike up the stairs. She goes into her bedroom, Mike following behind, and Jim reaches out, holding Mike back with a hand on his shoulder. "Nope, Mike sleeps in the guest room."

El whirls around and Mike steps back, steps away, and Jim meets El's hurt gaze. "But..." she starts, voice pleading, fear tinging the word.

"El, *no*," Jim insists before he rushes to explain; he's not just being a typical over-protective dad this time. "You need to be able to sleep on your own, ok? If you need him, he'll be here."

"Um," Mike starts, clearing his throat. "Can I sit with her until she falls asleep, at least?" he asks as he looks over at Jim. "I'll go into the guest room after that, I promise."

"Yeah, that'd be ok," Jim says with a nod.

El's gaze shifts to Mike, looking almost hurt at the compromise. "Mike?"

Mike smiles at El, though it's tired. "It'll be ok, El," he says.

With a hand still on Mike's shoulder, Jim looks pointedly at El. "El, go get into bed. Mike will be there in a minute, ok? I just need to talk to him for a bit."

El looks back and forth between Mike and Jim for a second, worrying her lower lip between her teeth, before she nods slowly, tired and very much not happy about this arrangement.

"I'll be in soon," Mike says.

El sighs. "Ok," she says, turning to walk to her bed.

Jim pulls Mike down the hall and to the guest room which only holds a double bed and a nightstand. The bed's made, but hasn't been slept in since Jim moved into the house. Jim flicks on the light as he pushes Mike ahead of him into the room before stepping in as well, closing the door behind him.

Mike gulps as Jim turns to him and Jim can see the kid's fists clenching at his side. "I'm sorry," he says, tone immediately defensive, like Jim'll kick him out any second. "But El needed me and I couldn't stay home and-"

Jim holds up a hand. "It's ok, Mike." He pauses. "Well, nothing's really ok, but I get it, alright?" Jim sighs and rubs his face with a hand. "How did you know she was having a nightmare?"

Mike bites his lip, brow furrowing, knocked out of his defensive front. "I think I was having it too?" he says, just as unsure about this as Jim is. "I woke up to the sound of El screaming and I just knew. So I grabbed my bike and rode over here as fast as I could."

Jim feels his eyebrows make the valiant effort to merge with his receding hairline. "Without telling your mother, I take it?"

Mike pales – again – and shakes his head. "No, I was in a hurry and I forgot," he says, his voice small.

Jim lets out a sharp breath. "Look, I'll wake you up before 6 and take you home, ok? I don't know if I want to explain to your mom why you snuck out of the house in the middle of the night to come here and I'm sure you don't either, I take it?"

Mike gulps and shakes his head. “No, sir,” he says, falling back on the honorific on reflex. Mike pauses and looks down for half a second before looking back at Jim, meeting his eyes. “Is El going to be ok? After everything that happened?”

Jim leans against the door. “I don’t know, Mike. Hopefully.” He shakes his head. “Hey, look, I’m sorry to be so strict with you two about all of this, but it’s not healthy for El to rely on you so much, you know? She needs to be able to take care of herself. Doesn’t mean she has to or want to, but she needs to be able to. You understand me?”

Mike nods, his whole body slumping, like air rushing out of a tire. “I understand. I want her to be able to stand on her own. I just...” Mike says, trailing off with a sigh. “I wish none of this had ever happened. She was doing so good and-” Mike cuts himself off, voice thick with emotion.

Jim reaches out to squeeze Mike’s shoulder. “I know, Mike. Me, too. We’ll help her through it, ok? But we’ll do it in a way that makes her stronger, not weaker. Together, yeah?”

Mike stares at Jim for a long moment before he gives him a small nod. “Yeah, together.”

With the moment over, his point made, Jim steps back and opens the door. Mike’s out of the room a heartbeat later and Jim watches as the kid enters El’s bedroom.

El’s lying beneath the covers, curled up in a small ball, but she lifts her head as Mike enters the room. “Mike?”

“Yeah, I’m here,” Mike says as he goes over to the bed. He sits down on top of the covers, leaning against the headboard, movements slow and deliberate, and gentle, so gentle. From her prone position, El wraps her arms around Mike’s waist, her head pressed against his stomach, and curls against him. One of Mike’s arms drapes over her back and the other comes down so his hand can touch her arm, fingers drawing soothing patterns on her skin. “Go to sleep, El,” Mike says, his voice quiet, gentle, loving. “It’ll be ok.”

There's a calm, steady strength to the way Mike comforts El, like it's as natural as breathing, and it almost blows Jim away, the maturity on display. Jim knows he was nowhere near that mature at almost 15, not even close.

Then again, you hadn't been through what he's been through by that age, either.

Jim sighs and just watches as Mike soothes El to sleep, a sinking feeling in his gut.

Because Jim just knows this is going to get worse before it gets better.

Much, much worse.

It doesn't even wait until the next night to start getting worse.

Jim calls in sick to spend the day looking after El, who's walking around like a half-animated zombie. He manages to convince her to take a nap after lunch, fear of what her dreams might have in store for her making her hesitant.

Jim should have heeded that fear.

An hour later, the house explodes with electricity, lights flickering in time to El's screams. And when Jim gets up to El's room, having run up the stairs, he stops, jaw gaping, at the sight of half the contents of El's bedroom floating in the air. Jim wakes her up, ripping her from the nightmare, and tries to ignore the crash and clatter of things falling to the floor as he comforts his ailing daughter.

Of course, not 20 minutes later, the doorbell rings and Jim hears the sound of someone pounding on the door. Then there's the sound of the front door flying open, El using her powers once again to let Mike in. Because who else could be knocking on the door that insistently?

It takes both Jim and Mike a solid hour to calm El down and Jim

can't believe how grateful he is for his daughter's almost 15-year old boyfriend, but this is where he's at. Even though said boyfriend looks just as tired and worried as Jim feels. Mike's paler than normal beneath his freckles and there are dark circles under his eyes that speak to his exhaustion. No one's gotten anything close to proper rest since El was taken in the first place, so it's been almost a week of running on fumes for everyone.

It's with that thought that Jim insists Mike go home later that evening, needing the kid to get some rest. Because Jim can't shoulder this burden alone and he knows it's unfair to put as much as he is on Mike's thin shoulders, but there's nothing else Jim can think to do.

Besides, Jim has a gut feeling that Mike will be back within hours.

He's right.

El has *another* nightmare and, this time, when Jim goes to wake her up at closer to 2 in the morning, second night in a row, he finds her levitating above her bed along with the other half of her things. Jim doesn't think to put an arm under El, so when he wakes her up, she falls the 2 feet straight down onto her bed, coughing as she cries.

And, again, not more than 30 minutes later, the doorbell rings, El opens the door, and Mike spills into the house.

Jim decides to just leave the door unlocked when he finally ushers Mike to bed in the guest room a couple hours later.

But the final straw, the bottom of the barrel, the moment Jim realizes he has to rethink everything with how they're handling this situation, comes the next night.

Another nightmare, El's powers out of control...

...But it takes almost an hour for Mike to get to the house.

This time, when the doorbell rings, Jim leaves El's side, worry bubbling in his gut, and heads downstairs. He gapes at what he finds.

At the sight of Jim coming down the stairs, Mike stops short, which gives Jim a chance to look the kid over. And he looks like *hell*.

Blood trickles down the side of his face from a cut near his hairline, bare arms all scraped up (since Mike seems to have forgotten a jacket), the knees of his jeans ripped, and *is he limping?*

"Jesus Christ, kid," Jim breathes. "What happened?" He closes the distance between him and Mike and holds the kid up by the shoulders – carefully, given the way Mike winces at the touch.

"Crashed on my bike," Mike mumbles. "Think I fell asleep somewhere past Cromwell."

Jim sighs and spares a glance up at the ceiling, a plea for something he doesn't know – strength, a sign, some more goddamn help, *anything*. He looks back down at Mike and begins to guide the young man upstairs. "C'mon, I'll help patch you up while you sit with El. She's not going to be happy about this."

True to form, El's *devastated* that Mike got hurt coming to help her and it sets off a fresh round of tears that has Mike rushing to try and console her, saying that it doesn't hurt that bad and Hopper's going to help fix him up, she'll see, and then he'll be fine.

Well, at least someone will be, Jim thinks. Because he's not fine. *Nothing* is fine. He hasn't slept in days, El's levitating off the goddamn bed when she has a nightmare, each one worse than the last since she's not getting enough sleep, and Mike's falling asleep on his fucking bike trying to get here to be there for her. Something needs to change – it *has* to. They can't go on like this.

Jim gets up to put the first aid kit away, leaving Mike and El cuddling on her bed – Mike sitting up against the headboard, El half reclined and pressed against his torso – and his thoughts swirl around him, desperate to find a solution.

Jim's only gone a minute, but when he gets back to El's room to see how the two are doing, he finds both of them fast asleep, Mike still sitting up, head tipped back, soft snores already emanating from his throat. Jim leans against the doorway and lets his head fall against the doorjamb. He knows he could, *should*, wake the kid up, guide him to the room that's been his for the past couple of nights. But he can't bring himself to do it, not with the way El's holding onto Mike, her

arms tight around him, or the pathetic image Mike makes, all scuffed up, bandages and gauze everywhere, pale and drawn, exhausted beyond what his body can handle.

Maybe he should let Mike stay....

Jim shakes his head to dislodge the thought, clearly the product of a sleep-deprived mind, but it sticks and, maybe it's *because* he's sleep-deprived, but the idea sounds...not bad. It could be just for a few days, long enough so that El can get some sleep – so that they *all* can rest enough to begin getting a handle on the new healing that needs to happen.

Jim sighs, can't believe he's considering this, can't believe he's *desperate* enough entertain letting his teenage daughter's equally teenaged boyfriend sleep over at his house *for multiple, consecutive* days so they all can get some goddamn sleep.

But it's the only idea he's got.

Jesus, looks like he's explaining this to Karen Wheeler after all.

After a handful of hours of uninterrupted sleep, Jim's idea is still looking like the best one he's got. So, not entirely a sleep-deprived idea, after all.

The clock reads 7 in the morning as Jim gets up. He spares a moment to glance in to El's room, finding that not much has changed. Mike's slumped further against the headboard, neck bent at an awkward angle that he's probably going to pay for once he wakes up, but other than the thin blanket that's draped over his legs, he's still in mostly the same position Jim left him in hours earlier: lying on top of the covers while El holds him close.

With a sigh, Jim walks into El's room, carpet muffling his footsteps, and reaches out to *very gently* shake the kid awake.

Mike wakes with a small start, a gasped breath, and groans a half a

second later as he tries to straighten out his neck. “Hop?” he breathes, using the nickname that, out of all the kids, only El’s used. Until now.

Jim kneels so he’s not looming over the kid. “Hey, can you come downstairs? I need to talk to you about something,” he says softly. But Jim’s words sets off what looks like the beginnings of panic in Mike’s eyes and Jim hurries to calm Mike before the panic can pick up speed. “It’s nothing you did, I promise. But there’s something I want to run past you and I need your help. Try not to wake El, though, ok? She needs as much sleep as she can get.”

With a gulp, Mike nods and, satisfied, Jim leaves as quietly as he came and heads downstairs to start a pot of coffee.

A few minutes later, Mike makes it downstairs, limping even worse than he did when he first got to the house, and Jim cringes. *Ankle must have swollen up while he slept*, Jim thinks. “Jesus Christ, Mike. Sit down before you fall down.” Jim makes sure to keep a careful eye on Mike while he hobbles over to the kitchen table and runs a visual check on the catalog of known injuries. “You want something to eat? I can whip us up some eggs and bacon.”

Mike licks his lips, a nervous tic that even Jim’s picked up on as a habit of the kid’s, and shakes his head. “Not hungry, yet. But thanks, though,” Mike rushes to say. There’s a long silence as Jim grabs his cup of coffee and sits down with Mike at the table. “So, um, what did you want to talk about?”

Jim takes a sip of his coffee and sets the mug down with a decisive click against the Formica. “This isn’t working anymore, Mike,” Jim says, launching right into it. “You can’t keep coming over in the middle of the night like this. What if you’d hurt yourself worse than you did? We need to be smarter about it. Now-”

As Jim speaks, Mike pales before his cheeks redden in ire. “No, I’m not going to stop helping El,” Mike interrupts, clearly fighting to keep his voice low so as not to wake the last sleeping occupant of the house. “You can’t make me, Hop. I *need* to be here, and-”

“Hey!” Jim hisses, interrupting right back. “Cool your goddamn jets. I

never said anything about you not coming over here.”

“But, you said-”

“I said you couldn’t keep come over *in the middle of the night*. Now, if you’ll just listen to me and *let me explain....*”

So Jim lays out his idea, which has evolved a bit since he first thought of it: first, he’ll ask Joyce if she and Will wouldn’t mind staying over for a few days. One, to help with El, and two, to assuage some of the concerns Jim knows Karen is going to have. Jim knows Joyce will be willing to help and, well, if it also kind of doubles as a test run of Jim asking Joyce to move in, well, then....

Next, once that’s taken care of, Jim’ll call Karen and, after some explaining, will ask if Mike can stay over for at least a few days to help. He’ll explain that El can’t sleep, that she has nightmares, and Mike’s presence helps calm her down enough so she can get some rest. Jim’ll supervise the entire time, trust him, he’s the Chief of Hawkins Police, he knows what he’s doing....

“Wait, you mean you want me to stay over for a *few days? At least?!*” Mike’s jaw has dropped. Clearly, whatever Mike thought Jim wanted to talk to him about, the reality is nowhere near his initial imaginings.

“I’m not giving you license to sleep in her damn bed, if that’s what you’re thinking,” Jim says and, at the indignant look on Mike’s face, Jim sighs and cuts off the defense Mike’s readying at the pass. “I know, I *know*, you’d never take advantage of her. But I was 15 once, too, ok? I know how teenage boys think. What, you think I never found myself alone with a pretty girl when I was your age?”

Mike groans and leans forward, head thumping against the surface of the table. “Oh god, please *stop*.”

Is Jim smiling? Oh, you bet your ass he is. Embarrassing the hell out of the kid is the least Jim deserves after the last week. “Just saying, kid. You never really grow out of it, either.”

“I hate you.” The words are muffled by the table and Jim chuckles.

But he sobers up pretty quick. “All seriousness, Mike,” Jim says, back to business. “I need your help. And I need you able to help. You falling asleep on your bike at 2 o’clock in the morning on your way over here isn’t going to make that possible.”

Mike lifts his head and nods. “Did you want me to call my mom?”

It’s clear from the tremor in Mike’s voice that he’s nervous. Somehow, he’s managed to not get caught sneaking out of the house and sneaking back in for the past couple of nights and Jim can only imagine the trepidation Mike feels about having to fess up to what’s been going on. “No, I’ll call her, ask her to come over. First, though, we need to eat and you need to clean up. Probably need to redo some of those bandages, too....”

When the phone rings at around 8 in the morning, Karen’s not expecting it to be Jim Hopper on the other end of the line.

And she’s certainly not expecting him to tell her that Mike’s over at his house – has *been* over at his house since the middle of the night – and that he needs her to come over so he can talk to her about something important, something he doesn’t want to discuss over the phone.

“Jim, I am so sorry,” Karen starts, mind immediately going to the worst. “I will make sure to talk to Michael about boundaries and that sneaking over to his girlfriend’s house in the middle of the night is *not* acceptable. Especially not with her in such a fragile state, given what happened, and-”

“Karen,” Jim says, cutting her off. “Mike’s not in trouble, ok? Just the opposite, actually. Just...can you come over? I know you have the little one, you can bring her too, if you need to....”

Karen shakes her head and thinks of Nancy, who she heard rustling around earlier when she was last upstairs. “No, I can get Nancy to watch Holly. What’s so important, Jim?”

There's a long silence before Karen hears Jim sigh. "It's... complicated, Karen. But, long story short, it has a lot to do with what happened last week."

Karen nods, not that Jim can see it. She thinks about when she heard the news that Dustin Henderson had been shot at Jim Hopper's house, *while Jim wasn't even there*, and that El was missing. She thinks about how Mike just shut down for the three days El was gone, lost and miserable. She thinks about Nancy's mania during that time, the frantic pacing, keeping an ever watchful eye on Mike throughout it all. Most of all, she thinks of the way all of Hawkins seemed to sigh in relief when it came out that Dustin would be fine, when El was returned to them *somehow*.

Of course it's not over yet.

A moment later, Karen finds herself sighing, as well. "When should I be there?"

"In an hour?" It's more of a question than a statement, but Karen takes it a declarative. "Yeah, an hour sounds good."

"I'll be there," Karen says. Jim gives her a brusque goodbye, not even waiting for Karen to return the gesture before Karen hears the line click. Karen looks at the receiver, hearing the faint dial tone emanating from the speaker, and hangs it up, lips pursed with worry.

Because Karen *is* worried. Nothing's been right since *the incident* and Karen doesn't know how get back to that point. And Jim's request isn't helping any, giving her more questions than answers.

A little while later, assured that Nancy is watching over Holly, Karen's in the car on her way to the Hopper household. She's only been there a handful of times, either to pick up or drop off Mike, but she knows the way, having made a good portion of the same drive on her way to Joyce's house.

On the way over, Karen can't keep her thoughts from wandering, mind seeking the shadows of the past. She, Joyce, and Jim were all in the same graduating class from Hawkins High, Class of '64. They'd all had such big dreams back then. Oh, sure, they hadn't hung in the

same circles – Karen Jenkins had been too much of a goody two shoes to hang with Joyce Horowitz and Jim Hopper – but they had Homeroom together for all 4 years and had formed some sort of tentative alliance that could sometimes be called friendship. And, once upon a time, Karen and Joyce had been good friends for an idyllic period during middle school, Karen entranced by how Joyce's hair made her look like Audrey Hepburn, and the two were thick as thieves.

But Karen remembers them most from high school – Jim tall, shaggy-haired, all broad shoulders and devil-may-care attitude; Joyce with her leather jackets and short bob haircut, sensual and idealistic; and Karen, with her prim skirts and knack for toeing the line, watching as Jim and Joyce snuck out to smoke, wishing she was that brave. But those big dreams had all been the same – dreams of making it big, of escaping Hawkins, of being *something*.

But then high school ended. Jim enlisted, shipping off two months after graduation. Joyce started hanging with Lonnie Byers, eventually marrying him when she got pregnant with Jonathan. And Karen? Well, Karen married Ted Wheeler when she was 20 years old, after her father had introduced the two as Ted was a junior associate at the firm her father worked at. They married 7 months after meeting, her 20, him 28, and, a year later, Nancy came along, a whole two months after Joyce gave birth to Jonathan.

Then Jim returned after Vietnam, moved to New York, got married, lost a daughter, and moved back to become the Chief of Police. Meanwhile, Joyce'd had Will and lost Lonnie; Mike came along for Karen and, finally, after a long while, Holly during a period of rekindled romance for Karen and Ted.

But they are all adults, now. Adults with responsibilities and kids and lost dreams, lives intertwined through their kids, seeming to only look back at 'what-ifs' while their children look forward to what could be.

The nostalgia mixes with the worry that runs through Karen's veins, leaving her feeling anxious and slightly nauseated. And when she pulls up to Jim's house and parks the car, she stands leaning against the open driver's side door for longer than necessary, trying not to

think the worst and hoping everything is ok.

But, eventually, Karen shuts the door to the car and makes the walk up to the front door. She notices Mike's bike leaning against the porch, handlebars cocked at an awkward angle, and worries all the more.

Jim answers the door after Karen rings the doorbell and gives her a small smile when he sees it's her. "Hey Karen, thanks for coming over." He steps aside, letting her in through the door.

Karen crosses over the threshold, one hand wrapped tightly around the strap of her purse. "Not like you gave me much choice, Jim. Now, what was so important that—" Karen turns and stops mid-sentence as she spots her son, standing in the living room, bandaged and bruised, looking like he'd been run over. Her heart leaps into her throat, her breathing feels too short. "Mike, oh my god, what happened?" She's at his side in a rush, reaching out to gingerly touch his face, just below where a bandage is covering up a nasty looking cut.

Mike winces and turns his head a bit, but that doesn't stop Karen from keeping her hand extended upward and wondering just when her son decided to get so tall. "I'm ok, mom," he says.

"Crashed his bike on his way over in the middle of the night," Jim says. "Fell asleep on the damn thing."

Karen looks at Jim, her jaw dropping, before she refocuses on Mike. "Is this true? Is that what happened?"

Mike blushes and Karen knows it's the truth. But Mike answers her, anyway. "Yeah. I wasn't going too fast, though."

Clutching Mike's shoulder, Karen looks over at Jim. "Is this what you wanted to talk about?" She looks back at Mike. "And why were you even riding over so late at night, anyway, Michael?"

"That's all part what we wanted to talk to you about," Jim says and Karen absolutely does not miss Jim's use of "we".

Jim gestures in the direction of the living room. "C'mon, let's sit down while we talk."

Jim settles in an armchair, while Mike and Karen sit on the couch. It's only then that Karen notices El's not there. "Where's El?" Karen asks. "Is she ok?"

Jim grimaces and Karen's heart lurches. "She's upstairs, sleeping," Jim says. "And she's not ok, Karen."

With a quiet, serious voice, Jim tells Karen about El's ordeal – running into the woods to get away from the people who shot Dustin, spending cold nights on the run and being lost – and the nightmares she's been having. He tells her about El calling for Mike on the SuperCom at all hours of the night after one of her bad dreams, about how Mike's been coming over after each nightmare...about how the nightmares are getting worse and none of them are getting any sleep and El needs the rest she's not getting to start recovering...

"...and that's why I asked you to come over," Jim says. "I need to ask you a huge favor, Karen. I need-"

But Jim never finishes his sentence because, from upstairs, El screams.

And the lights start flickering, every bulb flashing on and off blindingly.

Mike, who's been sitting silently next to Karen for the last 10 minutes, springs to his feet in a heartbeat. "Shit, shit, shit!" he bites out, taking off towards the stairs in a blink.

Heart in her throat, Karen's hot on Mike's heels, worry pulling her after her son with dizzying intensity. "Mike, what is it? What's going on?" she cries out as she races up the stairs. She can feel Jim just behind her, footsteps thundering, his hand trying to grab her arm – "Karen, wait...."

Mike runs into what Karen assumes is El's room. And Karen's only a few steps behind him and she's ready to run into the room after him, ready to help, ready to do *something*-

-And stops in the doorway, jaw dropping, unable to believe what she's seeing.

If any blankets had been covering El, the girl tossed them off during her nightmare. Which just makes it so much more apparent that she's *floating* two feet above her bed, body twisting in the air as she thrashes in the throes of her unconscious terror.

"Dammit," Karen hears Jim from behind her, but she doesn't turn – can't, actually – riveted by the fantastical sight in front of her.

But Mike doesn't seem fazed at all, Karen notices. And, as she wonders how her son can be so nonchalant about the fact that his girlfriend is floating above her bed, she watches as Mike goes over to the bed amidst screams of terror and flashing lights.

Mike kneels on the bed and reaches out for El, mouth moving in quiet words that Karen can't hear through El's panicked cries. One of his arms snakes out to press against the back of her hips, hand curling around her waist, so he can catch her. At the same time, Mike brings his other hand up, fingers trailing along El's cheek, pushing her hair out of her face, before he cups her face, palm pressed against the line of her jaw.

At Mike's touch, El quiets, the lights dim, and Karen can hear the words Mike's saying. "...C'mon, El. Wake up, now. I'm here, ok? I'm here, I got you."

A lot happens all at once. El opens her eyes with a gasp and whatever force keeping her in the air lets go, sending her falling back down to her bed. But Mike's there and he catches her, easing her back down gently. He sits down on the bed fully, up near the pillows, shoulder pressed against the headboard, like it's just where he's supposed to be.

"Mike?" It's El and Karen's heart breaks at how small and broken the young girl sounds.

Mike still has his hand cupping El's face and he caresses her cheek with his thumb, looking down at her with a soft smile. "Yeah, I'm here," he says, voice impossibly gentle, filled with love and worry and sounding so much older than his almost 15 years.

Then El lets out a gut-wrenching sob and, in a flash, is clambering

into Mike's lap while Mike is still arranging his legs to let her. His arms go around her, one hand in her hair, holding her close while he cradles her head against his chest, her ear pressed right above his heart. Mike holds El while she sobs like it's the most natural thing he can be doing, like anything else other than lending her his strength while she works through her terror is unimaginable.

A hand lands on Karen's shoulder and she jumps, forgetting that Jim was even behind her, and turns to look at him, aware that her mouth is still hanging open, gaping like a fish. The look on Jim's face is grim, though, resigned and it's clear he's also not surprised to find his daughter floating above her bed.

"I guess there are some other things we need to talk about," Jim says, quietly, trying not to disturb the two teens who are wrapped around each other on El's bed.

Karen spares a quick glance over at her son and his girlfriend, looking over just at the right moment to see Mike press a soft kiss against El's forehead, and finds her heart melting at the sight despite the craziness that's suddenly thrust itself into her life. But she looks back at Jim and finds herself wanting, *needing*, to know it all. "Tell me *everything*."

Jim's still for a long moment before he sighs and nods. "Let me call Joyce, see if she can come over. She's just as much a part of all of this. Maybe more, I don't know."

Karen follows Jim as he goes downstairs and, 15 minutes later, Jim's letting Joyce in, the two exchanging a quick, soft kiss. Karen feels her eyebrows lift higher on her forehead. *Since when are those two together...?* But, soon, all three are settled in the living room and, this time, Jim, with Joyce's help, tells Karen the true story, the one almost no one knows.

Karen learns about what really happened when Will and Barb disappeared two years ago, about the Upside Down and the monsters, about the true purpose of Hawkins Lab and their experiments on a young, 12-year old girl with awesome powers who had only ever known life inside those walls. And it keeps going, Jim and Joyce telling her about the Mind Flayer and Will, about El closing the gate

between worlds, about how the kids, including two of her own – especially two of her own – have been involved from the very beginning, from Mike’s devastation when El disappeared in ’83 to Nancy’s guilt about keeping what happened to Barb secret. Finally, Jim tells her about what happened a week ago, about the men who came after El, the same men who held her captive for so many years, and all the turmoil that’s followed in the wake of what happened.

Karen listens, shocked breathless, wanting to call Jim and Joyce crazy, not wanting to believe them, *wouldn't* have if she hadn't just seen El floating above her bed. It's all true, what Jim and Joyce are telling her, the truth written across their faces and in their voices. She's unable to believe so much has happened with Mike and Nancy that she wasn't there for, fearful that her kids and their friends have been in so much danger that she had no idea about. But, at the same time, it explains *so much* about what she's been noticing in both Mike and Nancy: Mike's anger and Nancy's fake smiles for most of '84, the way they each suddenly aged 10 years seemingly overnight, the fast closeness between Mike and El....

Karen gets to her feet in a blink, stomach swirling with a typhoon of emotions, and heads for the kitchen.

“Karen?” Joyce calls out, concerned. Karen understands; she hasn't said a word since Joyce and Jim sat her down and now she's moving suddenly, no explanation.

“Jim, you have any alcohol in this house?” Karen pauses. “Besides beer?” She looks over her shoulder to see Jim staring at her, a little dumbfounded.

“Uh, yeah,” he says. “Bottle of bourbon, top cabinet by the fridge.”

It takes a moment, but Karen finds it, using a chair to reach the bottle, and then finds a glass a half a minute later. She doles out a generous pour and knocks it back, feeling the burn of the alcohol, tasting the smoke of the bourbon. Warmth settles in her stomach and Karen feels her nerves calm along with it, eyes slipping shut for just a moment as she turns to lean against the kitchen counter. She doesn't care that it's not even 10 o'clock in the morning. She's just been told that her kids have been involved with interdimensional monsters and

underground government conspiracies; she *deserves* a drink, at least.

She wants to go back over to Jim, yell at him – at Joyce, too – for getting her kids, for getting *all* the kids involved in this. She wants to ask why he didn't go to someone for help, why he took this on himself. But Karen knows the answers to all of that. Mike and his friends, Nancy and Jonathan and even Steve...they're not ones to sit on the sidelines, all stubborn and loyal and inquisitive. And as for Jim, where should he have gone, to who? He's the Police Chief, for god's sake.

A pair of feet come into view and Karen realizes that she's been staring at the kitchen floor for several seconds. She looks up to see Joyce looking back at her, a soft, sympathetic smile on her face. And something inside of Karen crumbles. "I don't know how you've dealt with all of this," Karen says, voice raspy and thick with emotion.

Joyce quirks an eyebrow and cocks her head in a nod. "Well, you know," she says. "You almost get used to it, after a while. The kids help, too. Make it all worth it."

Karen smiles, but it feels a little shaky. "Certainly explains a lot."

Joyce lets out a laugh and Karen's brought back to middle school, giggling over shared secrets. "God, I can't imagine what this has looked like from the outside."

Karen sighs and sets down the empty glass on the counter. "I'm going to go check on Mike," she says, needing to see her son. She squeezes Joyce's shoulder with one hand before pushing past her and heading up the stairs.

Seconds later, she's back to standing in the doorway to El's room and Karen just leans against the doorjamb, arms loosely crossed over her chest. She takes a good, long moment and just stares at the room's two occupants.

Mike hasn't even noticed Karen, so involved is he with El. He still holds her close, but it's clear that El's fallen into a light doze. His fingers brush gently through her hair, mouth moving with the shape of words, and it takes Karen a moment to realize that Mike's *singing*,

the soft strains of “You Are My Sunshine” reaching her ears, the same song Karen used to sing to Mike to soothe him to sleep or to comfort him after a bad dream. Karen’s eyes mist over with tears and she holds back the sob that bubbles up in her throat.

Because her son doesn’t just love the girl he’s holding close. No, Mike Wheeler is irrevocably and undeniably *in love* with El Hopper. And Karen looks at him, really looks at him. The soft contentment on his face, tinged with tired sadness; the gentle way he holds El; the weight that rests on his shoulders that he bears with grace beyond his years. Karen can see the shape of the man Mike is turning into, 3 short years away from becoming an adult, and she’s proud, so proud, more than she has words for, of the man he’s growing up to be: loving, strong, giving.

At the same time, she wants to reach out and hold him close, protect him for a while longer. But, looking at the closeness between Mike and El, Karen knows that torch has been passed on: El holds the safe and key to Mike’s heart, just as he does for her, and it happened when Karen wasn’t looking.

“So, should I be the first to welcome you to the family or did you want that honor?”

The voice is quiet and Karen turns her head just enough to see Jim standing next to her, leaning against the wall as he peers into El’s room. Karen shakes her head, smiling even though it’s a little sad. “That obvious, huh?”

Jim sighs, scratching the side of his nose before running his hand over his hair. “I’ve resigned myself to the fact a long time ago that when it comes time to walk her down the aisle, the person I’ll be handing her off to will be your son, so....” He crosses his arms over his chest. “Still, it can be pretty overwhelming, what’s going on with the two of them, especially with everything else.”

Jim’s attempt to commiserate makes Karen feels a little lighter and her smile brightens. “So, what’s the over/under, do you think? 10 years? 8?”

Jim rolls his eyes and Karen’s shoulders shake with a quiet chuckle.

“Better be closer to 10,” he grumbles.

(jim never gets his wish. eight years later, on sunday, november 4th, 1994, ten years to the day after el comes back into mike’s life, el hopper will officially become el wheeler. jim’ll ignore karen’s knowing smile and when the two dance as the father of the bride and mother of the groom, he’ll glare at karen’s impression of him from so many years ago – “better be closer to 10” – and he’ll just shake his head.

“oh, shut up” – “no, you shut up”)

Notes for the Chapter:

I had to get Karen in this chapter, I absolutely had to. Also, I've been planning this plot point for weeks and I'm so glad it came out the way it did. Hope you enjoyed!

18. Mar 7 - Mar 15, 1986

Notes for the Chapter:

So, I could have split this up into two chapters, once I saw how long it got after I'd written it, but I had my performance review at work today and it was really good and I don't want to spoil the mood by trying to figure out where to make the break.

So, you get a 10k word chapter. Full of h/c fluff and Party feels.

Enjoy.

Mar 7 - Mar 15, 1986

Mike's not sure how long he sits there, holding El close until her tears calm and she falls into a light sleep. But he does know he could sit there all day, her weight pressed sweetly across his lap, her hair between his fingers, her head on his chest (he just wishes it was under better circumstances – really, *really* wishes).

The feeling of holding El in his arms always paints a rich tapestry of emotions across his heart, singing in his veins, a heady combination of love, safety, relief, happiness and always, *always*, at least a little bit of excitement. He just wants to hold onto her and never let go.

At some point, once El's sobs turn to quiet sniffles and Mike can feel her beginning to droop, head nodding against his chest, he starts singing, hoping to lull her to sleep. He's not the world's best singer, but he thinks he's decent enough (he can at least sing on key) and he finds himself singing the song his mom used to when she would sing *him* to sleep. Surprisingly, the song brings as much comfort to Mike as it does to El and, while she nods off, Mike feels some of his worry bleed away.

He sings what he knows of the song, what he can remember, a few times through (there's a few verses he can't remember for the life of him), before he stops, throat feeling the strain. It's enough, though.

El's asleep and Mike sighs with relief. She needs to sleep – he *needs* her to sleep – because it's the only way she'll begin to heal. And Mike needs her to get better, wants her to get back to somewhere close to where she used to be: happy, confident, unafraid – for her sake, if nothing else. Because it's nothing less than El deserves.

Pain in Mike's ankle draws his attention away from El and Mike carefully, slowly, wriggles his sprained ankle out from where it sits under his calf. El lets out a small whimper at the movement and Mike cringes. But he manages to slide his foot out from under his leg without waking her up and he breathes easier as the pressure is removed from his injury.

Mike sighs, the sound almost more of a groan, and he has to shake his head. He can't *believe* he fell asleep on his damn bike. He can't even remember it happening. One minute, he was upright, perfectly fine if a little sleepy, and, the next, he was on the ground, pain exploding along every inch of him. Luckily, he hadn't been too far away from El's house, but every step hurt and it took longer than Mike had liked to get to her.

But, Hop patched him up, let him stay, and now he's downstairs talking to Mike's mom and-

Mike lets out an actual groan this time. *His mom*. She had been behind him when he ran up the stairs to wake El from her nightmare, where she'd been floating above her bed and making all the lights flicker.

Mike sighs.

Well, shit.

Mike leans his head back until it rests on the headboard and he takes in a deep breath through his nose. He has no idea what his mom had seen, really. But, knowing his luck, his mom had seen *everything*, and now Hop's probably downstairs, having to explain the whole thing. And Mike can't imagine his mom being anywhere close to ok with any of it. God, she's probably going to be so mad at him. There's been so much Mike hasn't told her – so much he's actually *lied* about. How's she going to react next time she talks to him? Oh, god, what if

she forbids Mike from seeing El and-

Nope. Mike cuts that line of questioning thought off real quick. Not going to happen. Nothing is going to keep Mike from seeing El, not even his own mother.

But worry still bubbles in his gut and Mike wishes he could see the future, know how this is all going to shake out.

“Hey, sweetie.” The voice – low and soft, gentle – comes from the doorway and Mike looks over to see his mom standing there, a small smile on her face.

Mike gulps, keenly aware of how close he and El are, but he makes no move to put any distance between them. It’s as brave as a stance as he can manage. Maybe if his mom sees just how much he and El care about each other – love each other – she’ll understand, won’t keep him from seeing her.

It’s a dumb thought, but it’s all he’s got.

“Hi, Mom,” Mike says, keeping his voice quiet. El doesn’t even stir.

Karen pushes away from where she’s leaning against the doorway. “Can I come in?”

Mike takes a half a second to look down at El before he looks back up. “Um, ok, I guess. Just...be quiet. She’s sleeping and I don’t want to wake her up.” It’s as much an invitation as Mike can give.

Karen walks into the room, footsteps quiet against the carpet, moving slowly with – hesitation? Concern? Fear? Mike doesn’t know. But it makes him wary, on guard. So Mike just watches as his mom sits down on the bed, mattress dipping delicately with her weight, her hip right by Mike’s knee.

With her so close, Mike takes a moment to inspect his mom’s face, looking for any signs of, well, *anything* – a clue, a hint to how she’s feeling, what she’s thinking.

Karen smiles and it’s a little sad, a bit shocked, and a lot uncertain. She’s looking at El’s face where it’s pressed against Mike’s chest and

he tries not to squirm. He's not used to his mom seeing him and El being so affectionate. "She's the girl the government agents shows us pictures of when Will went missing, isn't she?"

One of Mike's hands rests against El's back and his fingers tighten against the fabric of her shirt. He licks his lips and sighs. "Hop told you everything, didn't he?"

Karen nods and there's a long silence before she sighs. "I thought she looked familiar when you first introduced her. I just couldn't place where I'd seen her until...you know."

Mike nods, understanding. It's hard to find the words to describe everything that's happened. He looks down at El, gathering strength (*she makes him brave, makes him feel like he can be everything if only for her, and finds himself always standing taller when she's around, like nothing in the whole of the universe can keep him down so long as she's by his side*). And when he raises his eyes back up to his mom, he forges ahead without hesitation. "Are you mad at me?"

Karen's brows furrow and she tilts her head. "What for?"

Mike lets out a sigh, bravery faltering just a bit, and casts his gaze towards the ceiling for just a moment. "For not telling you the truth about El or the lab or any of it."

Karen purses her lips and takes in a deep breath. "No, Michael, I'm not mad," she says after a long moment. "I won't lie – I'm *disappointed* – but I'm not mad. Believe it or not, I understand why you didn't say anything. I just...."

"What?" Mike asks, more than a little desperate and a lot guilty. Because his mom's *disappointed* and that's so much worse than angry. It twists in his gut, sinking against his spine, and makes Mike wish so much for how to make it better.

"All I ever want is for you to talk to me, you know that, right? I just want to be there for you, Mike. And I know you're growing up, but I always hoped you could trust me enough to come to me with anything." The words are soft, softer than anything since she walked into the room, if that's even possible, and Mike feels like the world's

biggest heel.

"I'm sorry, Mom," he breathes. "It's just...." He licks his lips, searching for the right words. "I was scared. The Bad Men were after El, but she was gone and I didn't know if she was ever going to come back. And then she came back and Hop told us not to say anything because it wasn't safe. And I didn't know if you'd understand or believe because sometimes *I* don't believe it really happened." Oh god, he's rambling and he can't stop. "And I didn't want you to be scared of El because she's done nothing wrong, Mom, *nothing*. She saved all of us so many times and they treated her so badly and it's not fair and-"

Karen reaches out and rests her hand on Mike's knee. She's smiling, comforting and safe. "Mike, stop, it's ok. I can't pretend I'm 100% fine with what happened, but it's ok. We'll work through this together, we'll get better at this."

Mike nods and draws in a stuttering breath. "So, um...*are* you ok? With what Hop told you? I know it's a lot."

The smile on Karen's face turns...not sad, but angry? Scared? "I don't know, Mike. You're right, it's a lot. I'll probably freak out later once the shock's worn off, once I've had a chance to think about it. I can't promise it's going to be easy for me, but...I want to be there for you, Mike and if that's what it takes, I'll find a way to cope with what's happened." She pauses and breathes out a sigh. "I don't know what I'm going to tell your father, though."

Panic surges inside Mike and his heart leaps into his throat. "No, Mom, you *can't* tell him. He won't understand, he just won't."

Karen levels a look at him and Mike feels himself shrinking against the headboard and he holds El just that much tighter. "Give me a little credit, Michael. But he needs to know something. Let me worry about that, though I promise everything will be fine, ok?"

Mike wants to say something in retort or warning and he's not sure what. But, before he can even decide which way he wants to go, El reaches out with her left hand and places it on his mom's hand where it rests on his knee. Mike looks at his mom, who looks at him briefly

before looking at El.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Wheeler,” El says and Mike wonders how long she’s been awake for, wonders what she’s heard.

For a long moment, Karen doesn’t say anything. She turns her hand beneath El’s touch, fingers brushing against the bruises around her wrist; they’ve yellowed over the past few days, but they’re still there, a stark and sobering reminder of what she’s been through. Mike thinks his mom looks like she’s going to cry, but he says nothing and just watches.

Karen gently wraps her fingers around the base of El’s palm and rotates El’s hand with both of her hands, thumbs brushing gently against the bruises on the underside of El’s wrist, checking to see if everything’s ok and healing. It’s only when El’s palm is facing up that Karen lets out a soft “oh”. Mike looks down and sees Karen extend one of her index fingers, painted nail brushing near the skin that’s marked with El’s tattoo.

Mike’s breath hitches. He forgets about the damn tattoo all the time. El either wears bracelets or uses concealer to cover it while she’s out, so he almost never sees it. But, when he does, it’s like a punch to the chest and he remembers what those people, the ones from the lab, once thought of her as: equipment, disposable, *not human*.

Mike can see his mom going through the same kind of realization and he finds himself speaking before he knows it. “Her name was Eleven,” he says, softly. “They didn’t even give her a name, just a number. It was the only name she had until she escaped.”

Karen’s lips tremble like she’s trying not to cry and Mike feels bad. “El, huh?” his mom says, connecting the dots.

“Short for Eleven,” El says, repeating the words Mike said to her all those months ago, the night they first met, when she’d been too scared to say more than a couple of words, jumpy and huddled beneath the fort he’d built for her in the basement – the same fort they still spend so much time in, just the two of them, safe and warm (though it’s a bit bigger and there’s a lot more kissing now). “Mike gave it to me. Gave me the choice. I’d never had that before.”

Maybe we can call you 'El', short for Eleven. The words from the past echo in his head and now Mike's trying not to cry. Because 'El' hadn't been something he forced on her; it had been something he offered, something she'd been free to accept or not. And having a choice, well...she'd never been given that opportunity until a scrawny 12-year old boy rescued her from a rainy night in the woods and sheltered her in his basement.

Karen looks between Mike and El and Mike's not sure what's going on her head exactly, but she smiles and it's sad yet warm at the same time. She pulls a hand away from where she's holding on to El's wrist and reaches for El's face, fingers cupping El's cheek for half a second before her hand comes down to rest on El's shoulder. "I'm so sorry, sweetheart," she says softly. "And you have nothing to be sorry for, ok? You just focus on getting better and let everyone else worry about everything for a while."

"Thanks, Mrs. Wheeler," El says and, though Mike can't see her face, he thinks she sounds like she's smiling.

And, thinking about El getting better.... "So, um," Mike starts, "I can stay and help El, then?"

"Say what, now?"

As it turns out, Jim hadn't yet gotten to asking Karen for the favor he originally had her over to ask. There's a bit of arguing, more than a little bit of hemming and hawing, but both Jim and Joyce manage to convince Karen to let Mike stay for a few days.

This involves Mike going home for a little while to pack a few things, leaving El downstairs on the couch while Jim makes lunch and Joyce goes home to gather her own things and to grab Will.

Which is how Will finds himself standing just inside the front door of El's house, duffle bag slung over one shoulder even though his house isn't that far away.

“Will.” It’s El and Will turns to see her where she’s sitting on the living room couch.

Immediately, Will walks over (he tries very hard not to think about Dustin lying on the floor here only a week ago and fails miserably). He drops his bag on the ground and sits next to El. “Hey, El,” he says, quiet, and instantly finds himself being snuggled up to. El’s arms wrap around his torso while her head rests on his shoulder and Will automatically brings an arm up to hug her closer.

“Hi, Will,” she says, just as soft. In the background, Will can hear Hopper and his mom bustling around in the kitchen, making lunch. She fidgets, like she’s trying to get comfortable.

“You ok, El?” Will asks.

El lets out a soft ‘hmpfh’. “Different than Mike. Shorter,” is what she says by way of explanation. “Sorry,” she says a beat later

Will laughs. “No worries. Everyone’s shorter than Mike. Well, except for Hopper.” And it’s true. Mike’s, like, 5’10”. The next tallest is Lucas, who’s a few inches shorter, with Dustin right with him. Out of the boys, Will is the shortest at 5’5”, only barely taller than both Max and El.

“That’s true,” El says. “Hop’s pretty tall.”

Will nods. “Mike’ll probably be just as tall. Not as big, though, I bet.”

El hums. “That’ll be nice,” she says, wistful and happy.

Will nods. He does have to say that Mike and El make a pretty cute couple and their existing height difference is definitely part of that. He imagines it’ll be more so once both of them are finished growing.

From his position, Will looks over at El, checking to see how she’s doing. She’s wearing a white tank top and pale pink PJ pants with little white clouds on them, skin of her arms and neck exposed, which only shows all the ways in which she’s still injured. The bruises are all fading, but there are still traces of them on her cheek, on her wrists, on her neck. The cut along her cheekbone is mostly finished healing, scabbing beginning to disappear to reveal whole flesh

beneath. And, more worryingly, there are deep, dark circles beneath her eyes, the color on her cheeks pale and drawn. She's tired, *exhausted*, and Will remembers what Mike's told him about her nightmares, about the swirling images, reminders of what she's been through, dredged up from her subconscious. Will also remembers how Mike looked just as tired, just as drawn. El's not sleeping, so Mike's not sleeping, especially because they're sharing her nightmares, which just means Will worries even more about both of them.

(and, he's not going to lie, it's weird that crazy shit went down and he wasn't involved other than knowing and caring about the people who were directly involved. so, progress?)

Will gently lifts the shoulder El's leaning on, nudging her. "Hey, I brought 'Battleship' with me. Wanna play while we wait for lunch?"

El gives him a soft smile. "Ok, sounds like fun."

10 minutes later, El and Will are still playing 'Battleship', the board between them as they sit on the carpet in the living room, just in front of the coffee table. She's sunk both his aircraft carrier and his destroyer and is well on her way to sinking his patrol boat. In turn, he's only managed to get both the patrol boat and her destroyer.

"You're so cheating," he says.

The smile El gives him is bright and happy, care-free. "Nuh-uh," she says. "Not cheating."

The front door opens and both Will and El turn to see Mike walking in, backpack hanging from one shoulder. Mike takes one glance towards the kitchen, where Hop and Joyce are talking, voices low, while they wait for lunch to heat up, before he spots Will and El on the floor. The smile that stretches across his lips as his gaze lands on El makes Will giggle with how damn cute it is.

"Hey," Mike says, quiet, backpack slipping so he's holding it by the strap as he walks over, dropping it by them moments later. "Having fun without me?"

“Hey, Mike,” Will says, watching as Mike sits down behind El, his legs outstretched on either side of her, and pulls her against him so her back is pressed up against his chest.

“You’re back,” El says, leaning back and tilting her head up to press a light kiss against the edge of Mike’s jaw.

One of Mike’s arms is around her waist, but the other comes up, hand cupping the side of El’s head, while he presses a kiss on her temple in return. “I’m back.” His mouth lingers near her skin, face against her hair, and Will knows Mike’s just breathing her in, reassuring himself that she’s still here. In return, El leans back even more, just enough to nuzzle against him, hair brushing against Mike’s cheek. Both of them have their eyes closed, like the whole world isn’t important just as long as they’re together. The affection that passes back and forth between them is as natural for them as breathing and Will’s in awe, he has to admit, at how effortless they make it look. It’s really not fair; Will just knows he’s going to compare all of his relationships to the unattainable standard in front of him.

“You know,” Will says, “You’re just setting me up for disappointment, here.”

El lowers her head to look at him. “What do you mean?”

“There’s no way that any relationship I’m ever in is going to be anywhere near as cute as you two are,” Will says, unable to stop smiling.

El smiles, but Mike blushes, though Will can see how happy Mike looks. “Can it, Byers.”

Will sticks out his tongue. “Make me, Wheeler.”

El swats Mike on the shoulder with the back of her hand. “Stop it, you guys.”

Mike breaths out a laugh. “Sorry,” he says, leaning forward to press another kiss against her skin, this time just in front of her ear, right above the corner of her jaw; this sets off a series of quiet giggles that bubble out from El’s lips. “So, who’s winning?”

“She’s totally kicking my butt,” Will says, smiling.

“You can still come back. There’s still a chance,” El says, conciliatory, like she doesn’t want Will to feel bad.

“Yeah, we’ll see,” is all Will says.

And, in the end, El sinks the rest of his battleships to the sound of Mike’s cheers. It’s all so normal, it makes Will want to cry.

If only it would always be like this.

Thursday becomes Friday, then the weekend, and then before anyone knows it, it’s nearly Monday and Spring Break is over.

Mike, along with Will and Joyce, spend the whole time from Thursday to Sunday night at the Hopper household, Joyce and Will letting Mike and Hop get some sleep so they can help El, who spends the time relearning what it means to sleep through the night. There are still nightmares, but with Mike there immediately after, ready to help soothe and comfort, offering hugs and kisses and the warmth of his own body, the effects don’t linger as long, the terror not as sharp. And Hop’s there, always there, watching, ready as back-up, making sure El lands on her feet.

Mike and Will share the guest room, while Joyce sleeps with Hop and no one says anything about it (though El and Will give each other hopeful looks when they realize what’s going on, while Mike looks on with a combination of confusion and mild disgust – because, again: parents, sex, *ew*).

But, then, it’s Sunday night, and Mike stays over as long as he can before he has to go home since he needs to get his stuff ready to go to school the next day. Even though Will and Joyce are both staying the night, El looks up at Mike’s face as he says goodbye Sunday night and knows he feels like he’s abandoning her to suffer alone.

“I’ll be back tomorrow after school,” Mike says in a rush. “I promise.

And if you have a nightmare, I'll be over before you know it." The words are said with such strength, such assurance, that El feels tears prick at the corners of her eyes. Because she's not going to school tomorrow, not until she's fully healed, and it'll be the longest she'll go without seeing Mike since he helped rescue her. And it's been so nice having him *here*, sleeping just down the hall, sharing every meal, being close enough to touch whenever she wants.

"Promise?" El can't help the way her voice tremors, can't help how small she sounds, and she wishes she could be like she used to be, wishes she were stronger.

It feels like it'll be ok when Mike reaches out to pull her into his embrace, his arms warm around her. El feels the familiar skip her heart gives whenever Mike touches her and the thrill it sends shivering down her spine makes her feel alive like nothing else does. "Promise, forever and ever," Mike says. And El believes him – god, does she believe him.

But El needs more than just words. Fingers curling into his shirt, El pulls Mike down, forcing him to bow his head as she stands up on her toes. A heartbeat later and then they're kissing. Mike's hands come up to cup her cheeks, fingers in her hair, and El's stomach does a light-headed inducing swoop, heart soaring, heat swimming in her veins. Her mouth opens beneath his, tongue flicking out to brush against his lips, an inviting caress. Mike lets out a low groan, lips parting so he can respond to her invitation in kind, and El completely forgets she's standing in the entryway where anyone can see them.

"Alright, alright, break it up, you two. Quit making out in my damn house" Mike pulls back so fast at Hop's voice, it leaves El dizzy and annoyed. She wasn't *finished*, dammit.

(someday, mark her words, el'll stop kissing mike when she feels like it and not a second sooner. mark. her. words.)

"Sorry, Hop," Mike says.

El turns to see Hop come over, tossing on a jacket as his keys jingle in the loose grip of one fist; an unlit cigarette dangles from his lips and El gives Hop a disapproving glare which he totally ignores. "Yeah,

yeah,” Hop says, clearly not believing a word coming from Mike’s mouth. “You ready, kid?”

Mike sighs, but nods anyway. “Yeah,” he says, sounding like El feels – sad and hesitant. He turns back to El. “Tomorrow?”

El nods and tries not to let her heart leap into her throat with panic (she fails). “Tomorrow,” she affirms. *(she knows she’s going to reach out for him through the void later, before she goes to sleep, but it’s not the same as actually having him there, not at all.)*

Then Mike’s gone, Hop driving him home, and El feels like part of her goes with him. Suddenly, she’s afraid how she’s going to get through the next 24 hours and hates the way her skin prickles, the way fear spider-crawls up her spine.

El feels more than sees Will come up beside her and then his arm’s wrapping around her shoulder. “You ok?” he asks.

“Don’t want to be alone tomorrow,” El says. Because both Hop and Joyce need to go back to work and the rest of the Party needs to go to school.

Will shrugs, the move jostling El’s shoulder. “You could go spend the day with Dustin,” he says. “He’s still recovering at home. Probably won’t be in school this week. You should call over, ask his mom if you can hang out with him.”

“You think that’d be ok?” El asks, looking over at Will.

Will smiles, grin toothy in a way that makes El’s heart happy. “Yeah, his mom’s cool like that. I’m sure she’d like it if he had some company while she goes to work. C’mon, we’ll call her together.”

El’s heart feels like it’s too big to contain within her chest. Because she’s surrounded by people who love her, people like Will, who always go out of their way to help her, to make her happy. How did she deserve to have so many good people in her life?

But El nods at Will’s words, a smile on her face. “Yeah, let’s call her.”

There are moments, since waking up in the hospital, rows of stitches across his back and front, where Dustin feels like a stranger in his own body.

This is to say nothing of the pain or the cold sweats or the night terrors or any of the last week since he woke up. And never mind the collapsed lung that's still healing, still shortening his breathing; or the ruptured spleen and damaged part of his liver the doctors needed to remove; or the muscle and bone damage around his ribcage.

It's fair to say that Dustin is Not All Right.

He spends Spring Break cooped up at home, all but confined to his bed, both going stir crazy and too tired and injured to be able to do anything about it. So Dustin passes the time watching way too many movies and counting the hours between visits from his friends.

And it's notable who shows up and who doesn't.

(they don't hate you, dustin. they're just busy or dealing with something else important. not everything's about you)

Steve comes by every day without fail, either before or after his shift depending on his schedule. He's on desk duty, still limping around with that cane he hates so much, but he makes time to spend with Dustin, to ask how he's doing, if there's anything Steve can get him.

Max and Lucas also come every day, though Max doesn't spend as long as Lucas does, and when they're over, they watch movies and laugh and joke and Dustin feels almost normal.

Will comes by every day until the end of the week when he suddenly doesn't anymore. It's the same with Mike, who stops coming by even earlier. The last Dustin sees of Mike during Spring Break is Wednesday, the day after he comes home from the hospital. And he looks *horrible* – dark circles etched beneath his eyes, skin too pale, practically shaking with nervous energy. He avoids Dustin's gaze, like Mike's unable to look at him for more than a few seconds.

Dustin doesn't blame him.

(your fault el got taken. couldn't save her, couldn't stop the bad men from taking her. you deserve to have mike mad at you)

Lucas says it's because of El, that she's been having horrible nightmares and that both Mike and later Will are helping Hopper help El.

It makes sense, Dustin thinks, remembering the only time he's seen El since it all happened – in the hospital, looking pale and broken, bruises on her cheek, her wrists, her *neck*, jumping at every shadow, every sudden movement-

(your fault)

-Dustin had wanted to hug her, but he couldn't get out of bed to do so. And she only gave his hand a brief squeeze as a greeting before pulling her hand away like she'd been burned.

(look at what you did, dustin. no wonder they don't want to see you)

So when his mom comes in Sunday night the day before school's supposed to start back up, letting him know that El wants to come over and keep him company while their friends are in school, Dustin tries and totally fails to hide his shock.

"Is that ok, Dusty? I know you haven't gotten to spend a lot of time with El recently, and with the rest of your friends going back to school, it might get lonely during the day. But, I can call Chief Hopper back and tell him not to-"

"No!" Dustin rushes to say. "No, it's ok. I'd like the company. It'll be fine. I miss her, anyway."

His mom smiles. "Well, of course you do, she's such a sweet girl...."

Dustin doesn't sleep that night. Instead, he dreams of the crack of gunfire, of men holding El down, of her screams.

Morning both takes forever to arrive and is there before he knows it.

Hopper drops El off on his way to work, before Dustin's mom leaves to go to work herself. Dustin can hear the doorbell from his bedroom, where he's lying in bed, exhausted from the effort it took to shower and eat breakfast. It gets easier every day, but Dustin knows he has a bit of a way to go until things get back to as close to normal as they ever get.

From his bed, Dustin can hear the faint, muffled sounds of people talking and then his mom is knocking on the door, sliding it open a few moments later. "Dustin, El's here."

And, so, Dustin gets his first look at El in a week. She looks...smaller – tired, a bit too pale, not as indestructible. She's wearing a too-large sweatshirt (Mike's, probably) and a pair of green PJ pants, her hair pulled back in a loose ponytail. But El looks at Dustin and smiles sweetly, her eyes glassy with tears. Dustin gulps down the guilty lump that forms in his throat.

(your fault she got hurt. don't deserve her smiles)

"Hi, Dustin," she says softly.

Dustin manages a smile. "Hey, El."

"Now," his mom says, "I know the two of you are probably going to watch TV all day." She gestures to the TV and VCR that have been set up in his room. "But, if you get hungry, there's a leftover casserole in the fridge. Just reheat some in the microwave. And there's sodas in the fridge, too. And Dustin can tell you where all the snacks are."

El smiles at his mom. "Thanks, Mrs. Henderson."

"And call if either of you need anything. El, I think your dad's going to pick you up at 5:30. I should be home by then, but I'll call if I end up being late. Have fun, you two!"

And then it's just El and Dustin, alone, together for the first time since he got shot and she got kidnapped.

El walks further into his room and slides her backpack from her shoulders, placing it on the ground by the door. Wordlessly, she comes over to his bed and arches her eyebrows in question, seeking

permission. Dustin gestures and El sits, one leg folded in front of her, weight dipping the mattress, knee pressed against his hip. She looks at him and smiles. "How are you feeling?" There's an edge to her smile that Dustin can't place and it causes his heart to stutter a bit.

"Getting better," Dustin says, quiet. "How about you?"

El looks down at her lap and takes in a deep breath. When she looks back at Dustin, she reaches out and grabs one of his hands with both of hers, fingers weaving around his. "Getting better," she says. She closes her eyes and Dustin watches, enraptured, as she opens them, tears gathered in the corners of her eyes. "I'm sorry," she says, voice small, choked with tears, brow furrowed, lips trembling – trying not to cry.

Dustin's heart breaks and he sits up, wincing as the move pulls at his stitches. "What for?"

"You got hurt because of me," she says. "It's all my fault."

"Hey, no, no, no," Dustin says.

(taking the blame for what you did, you monster)

He reaches out and pulls her into a hug, one El eagerly returns. Her arms are tight around his neck and Dustin's not even anywhere near nervous that he's hugging a girl in his room – because it's *El*, the girl he looks up to as a superhero, the best friend who brightens his day with her smiles, the sister he'd do anything to protect.

"It's not your fault, El," he says. *It's mine*, he thinks but doesn't say.

El snuffles and burrows her head against his neck and shoulder. "I'm glad you're ok," she says a few moments later. "I like your hugs."

Dustin can't help but smile. "Better than Mike's?"

El scoffs. "You wish, Henderson."

Dustin actually laughs at that. "Oh, I love you, El." The words are easy for him – he doesn't love her like Mike does – but they feel good to say.

El squeezes him harder, mindful of his still healing body. “Love you, too, Dustin. *Missed* you.” She pulls back, pressing a quick kiss to his cheek as she goes, and Dustin lets her. She’s wiping tears from her cheeks, but she’s smiling. “So, I brought some movies over, thought you might want something different. But we can watch whatever you want.”

“No, please, lady’s choice,” Dustin says.

El purses her lips through her smile before the smile wins out. “Let’s watch ‘Star Wars’. The whole thing.”

“All three?”

“All three,” El says.

Dustin smiles. “Excellent.”

El giggles. “Where are they?”

“Oh, they’re just over on the dresser there. The remote’s on the nightstand and-” The TV flicks and, a second later, the small pile of cassette tapes is floating over, landing in El’s outstretched hand. “Whoa,” Dustin breathes. “Sometimes I forget how awesome you are.”

El rolls her eyes at him, but she’s blushing. “It’s nothing, really.”

Dustin guffaws. “No, actually, I think you might be a real life Jedi.”

El lets out a small whine. “Dustin!”

“Ok, ok, I’ll stop.”

El pops Episode IV into the VCR and presses play, all with her mind, once the two are settled in. They’re leaning against the copious pillows Dustin’s mom has set up and Dustin feels El snuggle against his side. He wraps an arm around her, hand lightly draped over her shoulder, and they hold each other while they watch the opening text crawl.

There’s a couple of breaks during the movie so El can go get snacks, but each time she comes back, the two of them go right back to

snuggling, healing after the horrible trauma.

Over the next few hours, there are moments when Dustin can't breathe, but he thinks it's just his lung acting up.

It's not until they're almost to the end of Episode V when it hits him...and everything goes kind of sideways.

Lando has just betrayed Han and Leia to Darth Vader and Dustin finds himself crying. Not quiet tears, either; full-on, body-wrenching sobs.

"No, oh no," Dustin hears El say and the sound of the movie cuts off. "Dustin, what's wrong?"

He can't, he just can't, and he doesn't know why, doesn't know what's happening. "I'm sorry," he manages to get out through the pain, both physical and emotional.

"Why? Dustin, I don't understand."

Dustin feels El pull on him so that he's lying on his side, facing her, her arms around him. "I couldn't save you. I couldn't do *anything* to help you." His face is buried in his hands, further muffling his words which are already partially obscured by his tears. "It's all my fault, El. If I hadn't been there, distracting you, they wouldn't have gotten you and Mike wouldn't be so angry with me and you'd never have gotten hurt and I'm sorry. I'm *so sorry*."

Having confessed his sins, Dustin waits for confirmation, for her to push him away. But El holds him tighter, one hand on the back of his hair, guiding his head so he's pressed against her neck and shoulder. *Always saving me*. Her embrace is so strong, so warm, so sure and unyielding, that Dustin feels himself crack open. Grief pours out through the open wound and El takes it all in, letting him wrap his arms tight around her, tight enough to chase the demons away, to make him feel whole again.

"Shh," she breathes and Dustin can hear the way tears hitch her words. "Not your fault. It's the Bad Men's fault. And they're gone, Dustin. They can't hurt us anymore. And Mike's not angry at you, I

know it. I promise.”

Together, they cry, laying there as emotional wounds are scoured clean, until they're both exhausted, falling into a light sleep.

It's the ringing of the doorbell, a few hours later, that causes them both to wake. “It's Mike,” El says, voice sure through the rasp of sleep. “I asked him to come over.” Wait, what? How? When?

El gets up to let Mike in, leaving Dustin alone for a moment with his questions, which gives him the opportunity sit up, heart jumping up into his throat. But then Mike comes in, guilt plastered all over his face and, before Dustin can blink, Mike's sitting next to him, giving him a fierce hug, profusely apologizing, which causes Dustin to start apologizing for making him worry. It's not long before Mike and Dustin are talking over each other, each trying to outdo each other with how sorry they are.

El, sitting on the foot of the bed, eventually loses her patience. “Alright, you're both sorry,” she says, louder than she normally gets. “Can we finish watching the Trilogy, already?”

El's words immediately cause Mike and Dustin to shut up, both of them looking at her. “Dude, your girlfriend's awesome,” Dustin says to Mike.

But Mike's looking at El, wide-eyed, hearts practically dancing in his vision. “God, I love you.”

El beams. “Aww, I kn – eek!” She lets out a shriek as Mike lunges for her. The shriek becomes a series of giggles as Mike peppers kisses on her face and neck, his arms wrapped tightly around her waist.

Dustin's eyes roll so hard, he's surprised they don't fall out of his head. “Guys, come on! Not on my bed.”

“Mike, stop,” El says through her giggles. “We're being rude.”

“Don't care,” Mike says a moment before he kisses El full on the lips and Dustin can hear El sigh as she returns it.

By this point, Dustin's just shaking his head. God, the things he puts

up with...

But El pushes Mike away a few seconds later. "Mike," she says in warning.

"Ugh, fine," Mike says. But he's not really annoyed, Dustin can tell, and Mike pulls back, leaning against the headboard, pulling El with him so she's sitting across his lap. Dustin settles next to them, feels the warmth of their combined body heat bleed into him, and he begins to relax.

And, as El starts the movie back up where she and Dustin left off earlier, using her mind to un-pause it, Dustin thinks that maybe, just maybe, everything's eventually going to be ok.

The first day back from Spring Break is just *weird*. Everybody knows *something* happened with El Hopper and Dustin Henderson, and they're not exactly sure what, but they do know it involves Dustin getting shot and El going missing for a few days before being miraculously returned to Hawkins.

So, of course, the *entire school* stares at the remaining Party members who do show up at school the first Monday back from the break.

The whispers follow Lucas wherever he goes, the stares burning into his skin. *God*, he wants to yell, *it's none of your business!*

But he can't stop the curiosity, the gossip, and he sighs, resigned to his fate.

So Lucas does what he does best: watches and protects. He keeps an especially close eye on Mike, who's clearly on edge, jittery and pale. Mike's worried, Lucas can tell, worried about El, about being away from her where he can't help her. Normally, Lucas would be giving him major shit for acting all lovey-dovey and whipped. But Lucas saw how Mike was during the days El was gone, saw how El was when she got back, injuries stark against her skin, fearful shadows in her

eyes. Lucas *saw* and so he holds back.

Which makes the stares and whispers from the rest of Hawkins High so goddamn annoying.

“You’re going to burn a hole in someone’s head, you keep staring so hard, Stalker.”

A squeeze of Lucas’ hand pulls his attention away from the cafeteria. It’s still Monday and Lucas and Max are waiting for Will and Mike to show up for lunch. Lucas turns to look at Max and, for a moment, he can’t breathe as he gets lost in her sea blue gaze. Max is smiling at him, the corners of her lips just barely ticking up, and Lucas finds himself smiling back, his full blown. “Sorry,” he says and tries to relax, his smile fading. “It’s just...they don’t understand, you know? They just make it worse.”

Beneath the cafeteria table, Max hooks her ankle around Lucas’ shin and weaves her fingers through his. “Just ignore them, they don’t matter,” she says before she nudges him with her shoulder. “Besides, they just wish they had lives as exciting as ours.”

It’s a joke, Lucas knows, but he still rolls his eyes. “Our lives could do with a different kind of excitement. The kind where people don’t get shot or kidnapped.”

Max’s fingers are cool against his cheek as she turns his face towards hers and, before Lucas knows what’s going on, she’s kissing him, soft and sweet. Lucas pulls a gasp in through his nose before he’s kissing her back, fingers tightening where he’s holding her hand.

The kiss doesn’t break – instead, it lingers and Lucas wants to hold her closer, wants to run his fingers through her hair and just breathe her in.

Then her mouth moves against his, lips gliding against his own, a promise for later. It’s brief, filled with heat, before Max pulls back, her face flushed. She’s smiling, eyebrow quirking. “So, how’s that for excitement?” He’s grinning like an idiot, isn’t he? Who’s he kidding? Of course he’s grinning like an idiot....

But, before Lucas can answer, someone else calls out. “Trying to take the title of PDA King and Queen of Hawkins High away from Mike and El?”

The sound of Will’s voice pulls Lucas’ attention away from Max and he looks over to see Mike and Will heading over, trays of food clutched in their hands.

"Oh, ha ha," Mike deadpans as he and Will sit.

“That’s scientifically impossible,” Max says. “There is no couple more all over each other in all of Hawkins than Mike and El. I’m surprised El hasn’t taken up permanent residence in your lap or that your lips haven’t fused together forever, Wheeler.”

Mike blushes, fierce and hot. “Bite me, Max.” The words lack true malice, instead filled with the normal bickering that makes up Mike and Max’s friendship.

“Isn’t that El’s job?” Max asks, eyebrows waggling, drawing a guffaw from both Lucas and Will.

Mike groans and buries his face in his hands. “God, just lay off me-”

“Words I’m sure El’s never said to you,” Max interjects.

Mike’s hands fly from his face, palms landing on the table with a slap, jostling all their food. “You know what, Mayfield-”

“Oh, relax, Lover Boy, I’m just teasing,” Max says with a wave of her hand, deflating the situation in an instant. It’s one of the things Lucas loves about her. There’s a pause. “How is she, anyway?” Max asks, turning the mood serious.

“She’s ok,” Will says before Mike can. “I just saw her this morning. She’s spending the day with Dustin since they’re both not here.”

The conversation moves on from there, the day ending before they know it, and Lucas watches as Mike jets out of the building once school is over, rushing on his way to see El.

The week continues, but Hawkins High can’t seem to stop gossiping

and Lucas finds himself hoping that El and Dustin come back soon so everyone can see them and then get passed the damn rumors.

Wednesday rolls around – same whispers, same stares, same gossip – but Lucas mostly ignores it by now, exhausted from his earlier worry. He’s walking out with Mike from their history class, Lucas planning to head home, Mike to El’s house, when Mike stops, mouth dropping open. His hand shoots out, grabbing Lucas by the arm.

“Mike, what’s wrong?”

“Shit, oh *fuck*.” Mike turns to look at Lucas. “I forgot. I need to talk to El’s teachers to get her homework that she’s missed and then I need to go grab something from home that I promised my mom I’d take over to El.” Mike pauses, licking his lips. “Can you go over and keep her company until I get there? Please? I wouldn’t ask, but there’s no one else and El doesn’t like being alone for too long.”

Lucas nods without hesitation. “Yeah, not a problem.” And it’s not, really. He’ll call home when he gets to El’s house to let his mom know where he is. Besides, he cares for El, too, and wants her to be ok. “See you in a bit?”

Mike sighs with relief. “Thank you, man. *Thank you*.”

Lucas smiles and shakes his head. “Really not a problem. El’s my friend, too, you know.”

The sunlight dapples the road as Lucas bikes out to El’s house. The days are starting to stretch out, sun setting later and later, and soon it’ll be spring and then summer. But the air’s still got a bit of a bite to it, winter’s icy grip not ready to let go just yet, and Lucas is glad for the sweatshirt he has on.

From school, it only take Lucas 15 minutes to bike to El’s house and he leans his bike against the porch before he heads up the wooden steps to ring the doorbell.

A few moments later, the door opens and Lucas looks down at El, who's smiling up at him. It's been a few days since he's seen her and Lucas is relieved to see that she's looking a lot better. The bruises have all faded and the cut on her cheek is healed. But there are still the shadows that cling to the edges, tightening the corners of her eyes just enough, making her just that much smaller. Lucas' heart gives a small lurch in his chest. "Hey, El. Mike'll be by in a while," he says by way of greeting. "But he wanted me to keep you company until he can get here."

El's smile broadens. "I know, he told me." That puzzles Lucas for half a second before he remembers Mike and El's weird mind connection thing. Jesus, there is too much *weird* in his life. El steps aside to let Lucas in, but she doesn't close the door even when Lucas is finally standing in the entryway. "Hey, would you mind if we went on a walk? I know you just biked over, but I've been inside all day and I'm feeling...."

Lucas grins. "Cooped up?"

El chuckles. "Yeah, cooped up. Would that be ok?"

Lucas nods. Whatever it takes to keep her smiling and happy. It's the least she deserves. "Yeah, not a problem. Just as long as you let Mike know with your weirdo mind powers," he teases.

El sticks her tongue out at him in jest. "Hold on, let me put on some shoes." As she turns to go upstairs to grab shoes, Lucas notices that she's fully dressed otherwise, wearing jeans and a soft purple sweater. Probably was going to go on a walk with Mike when he got here. Lucas smiles. Boy, is Mike going to be pissed he missed this.

El comes back down a few moments later with a pair of black chucks on her feet, sparkly green nail polish painted on the rubber toes, and she grins at him. "Ready!"

Lucas laughs. "C'mon, let's go. You lead the way, Ms. Hopper."

They step outside, El locking the door behind her with her powers, and Lucas absolutely does not miss the way she breathes in the late winter/early spring air. They start walking towards Will's house,

avoiding the roads, and an easy silence stretches between them for about a minute as they walk through the trees, dead leaves crunching underfoot.

“Thanks for coming with me,” El says, breaking the quiet.

Lucas smiles and nudges her with his elbow. “Anything for you, Ellie.”

El smiles back. “How’s school? Mike was telling me it’s been weird this week.”

Lucas rolls his eyes and heaves a dramatic sigh, which makes El giggle. “So weird,” he says. “Everyone’s staring and shit, like they have nothing better to do or something.”

El shrugs. “People are just curious,” she says. “It’ll go away eventually.”

Lucas grumbles. “Yeah, but you and Dustin don’t deserve to have people gossiping about you when you’re just trying to get better. It’s not fair.”

“There’s a lot that’s not fair,” El says with a sigh. There’s a pause before El smiles, the expression mischievous. “So, how’s French class without me and Dustin?”

Lucas catches her up on not only French class, but some of the other goings-on that she might not have heard from Mike and, before he knows it, they’re nearly at Will’s house.

El stops him by tugging on his sleeve. “C’mon, let’s turn back,” she says, hesitating as she looks up at him, hope in her eyes.

Lucas rolls his eyes dramatically, but he’s smiling, so it ruins the picture. He knows what she’s going to ask, so, he beats her to the punch. “Hey, want a piggyback ride for the way back?”

El giggles and nods. Lucas turns away from her and kneels so she can hop on to his back, her weight familiar against him, and she wraps her arms around him as he loops his arms under her legs. El’s light and it’s barely anything to lift her into the air. Hell, Mike could

probably give her a piggyback ride, but Lucas likes that it's something that he and El do, like it's their special thing.

And, as Lucas carries El back to her house, her weight jostling a bit against his back, he finds that he's missed this, *a lot*, and his heart twists in his chest at the realization. And Lucas doesn't want to think about how close it was to never being able to experience this again, giving one of his best friends and his hero a piggyback ride because it makes her giggle with happiness.

But it's too silent back there, his ear empty without El's chatter. And then he hears her sigh, the sound small and sad. "You ok back there, El?"

El shakes her head against his shoulder blade. "Sometimes I think it would be better if you guys never met me."

The change in mood almost gives Lucas whiplash, but he knows from experience that trauma like what El's gone through can do strange things to a person's mood. But El's words are a bunch of nonsense that Lucas just won't stand for.

Lucas stops and gently lowers El back down to the ground. That she doesn't even question why adds a sense of urgency to the way Lucas turns around. He looks down at her and grabs her by the elbow. "That's bullshit, El."

El, who had been looking down at the ground, face downcast, looks up at him, eyes going wide. "What?"

"You saved us. Even if we'd never met you, Will still would have gone missing, we would have still looked for him. Probably would have gotten eaten by the Demogorgon eventually. And, if not that, then the gate and the Mind Flayer would have swallowed us whole. You stopped all that."

El frowns. "But it's my fault all that happened in the first place. I opened the gate, remember?"

Lucas heaves a sigh. "Yes, and you closed it. Yeah, you made a mistake, but you *fixed* it. And, even if none of the bad stuff

happened...” Lucas swallows. “We’re all happy that you’re in our lives, El. Not just Mike – though he’s probably the happiest. Seriously, that boy loves you *so much*, it’s ridiculous. But we all love you, too, El. You’re our friend, you’re one of the Party.” Lucas crosses his arms over his chest, suddenly feeling a little uncomfortable. “And I know I wasn’t the nicest person when we first met and I know I’ve already said sorry for it, but I know I haven’t told you that meeting you was one of the best things that have ever happened to us. I can’t speak for the others, but I know I’ll never regret meeting you and my life will always be better for having you in it.”

A long pause stretches between them and Lucas squirms a bit. He smiles and gives a half-shrug, trying to lighten the moment. “Besides, who else would I give piggyback rides to?”

But El’s still looking up at him, tears in her eyes, lips curved down ever so slightly. She lets out a snuffle and Lucas is about to ask her if she’s ok, but he doesn’t get the chance before El launches herself at him, her arms going around his torso in a tight hug. Lucas hugs her back automatically, holding her tight as he feels her tremble with emotion. “Love you, too,” she says. “I’m so happy I met you all.”

“Even when I give you shit?”

El snuffles again, but she also chuckles and Lucas chalks it up as a win. “Especially when you give me shit.”

They hug for a few more moments before they pull apart. Lucas smiles. “C’mon, let’s get you back home. Don’t want your boyfriend freaking out if he gets there and you’re not.”

El gives him a small smile that’s somehow smug and all-knowing. “Already told him where we are,” she says, absently wiping away traces of her earlier tears.

Lucas rolls his eyes and smirks. “Yeah, still weird.”

El harrumphs, but she’s grinning regardless. “Well, you’re just jealous you and Max don’t share what Mike and I do.”

“Uh-huh, right. Me jealous of you and Wheeler? Keep dreaming,

Hopper, keep dreaming....”

The rest of the week passes quickly and then it's Friday, the day before El's birthday.

Jesus, what a shitty pre-birthday week, Max thinks. Still, it could be worse. It could *always* be worse.

Friday afternoon, once school is out, finds Max and Mike walking the last 10 minutes to El's house, Max's skateboard under an arm while Mike steers his bike with one hand. In addition to her backpack, Max also has a duffle bag slung over her shoulder, strap resting across her chest so that it bounces against her hip with every step. As part of El's birthday celebration, Hopper's letting Max spend the night for an impromptu slumber party that'll segue neatly into her birthday party tomorrow night. So Max is walking with Mike, since Mike's going to spend some time with El before he has to go home for the evening.

“So, you got El's birthday present, yet?” Max asks.

Mike gives her a look that's both flat and withering. “What do you think?”

Max smirks. “Just checking, Lover Boy.”

Mike rolls his eyes. “Got it for her weeks ago, actually,” Mike says. “She, um, whenever some of the girls in our class wear dangly earrings, El does this thing where she tugs a little on one of her earlobes – I don't even know if she knows she's doing it. So, I got her a gift certificate to a place where she can get her ears pierced and I got her a bunch of earrings she can wear later. Mrs. Byers agreed to drop us off for a few hours to get it done, so I'm going to take her out to lunch or dinner – whichever she prefers – just the two of us, and go with her to get her ears pierced.”

Max raises her eyebrows. Damn, that's a pretty good present. Seriously, way to pay attention, Wheeler. Max smiles. “That's good,

Mike. She'll love it."

Mike looks over at Max, like he's unsure to believe her or not. "You think?"

Max punches Mike in the arm lightly, just a tap with her fist. "Yeah. Should net you some serious brownie points. Plus, like, some hot and heavy action, if you know what I mean."

Max says it to get a rise out of Mike. But instead of him getting his hackles up, Mike just smirks, like the cat that got the canary. "Don't need to get her a good birthday present to get *that*, Mayfield."

Max groans and rolls her eyes. "God, I forget how *gross* you two are sometimes," she says as Mike laughs.

"Hey, you started it. I'm just finishing it," Mike says through a chuckle.

Max glares, but she's smiling, so the effect is ruined. She's happy things are getting back to normal, happy that some sense of equilibrium has been restored, one where she and Mike can give each other shit and tease and he's not looking so sad and broken, one where she can go to her best friend's house for a sleepover and giggle like the girls they are.

Something of her emotion must show on her face, because Mike's smile fades and he looks at her with concern. "You ok, Max?"

Max breathes out a quiet laugh and shakes her head a bit to dispel the clouds. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just...happy. Happy she's back, happy she and Dustin are ok...happy. You know?"

Mike smiles and it's genuine. He steps closer to her as they walk and wraps an arm around her shoulders. Max leans into the one-sided hug, her head pressing briefly against his shoulder as he squeezes her, before they part. It's a rare display of affection for them, but Max knows she loves Mike just as much as the rest of her friends, despite the bickering. "I'm happy, too," Mike says, quiet.

"You just love her so damn much, don't you?" Max says, gentle with her teasing.

But Mike answers her seriously. "I do, I really do." The gravity in his voice makes Max's heart hurt with just how powerful it is and, for a moment, she's envious. But she's mostly just happy for them.

"I'm glad you two found each other," Max says. "Gives the rest of us something to aspire to. Mike and El, making love look easy since 1983."

Mike blushes and rolls his eyes. "Max..." he whines. "Do you have to?"

"Tease you relentlessly about your undying love and affection for the woman of your dreams, the woman who'll bear your children, your soulmate, the future Mrs. Wheeler? Yeah, I think it's in our friendship contract. Fine print."

Mike squawks. "There was a contract? I didn't sign a damn contract!" It's so very telling that he pushes back against *absolutely none* of the ways she described El. *None of them*. Boy's got it bad....

"It was an opt-out contract, I'm afraid. Non-signature is taken as binding assent." Max shrugs and grins. "Sorry. I don't make the rules. I just enforce them."

"I hate you," Mike grumbles.

"Aww, love you too," Max coos.

They chat and tease the rest of the way. And when they get to El's house, the smile El gives them when she sees the both of them is blinding, it's so happy. Max watches as El and Mike greet each other with almost sickeningly romantic kisses, murmuring hellos and sweet nothings for a minute or so until Max breaks them up ("Alright, alright, let me hug the birthday girl, Wheeler. Quit hogging her.")

It's good to see El so happy, to see her doing better. Max's skin crawls when she thinks of how El looked after she came back, pale and drawn, bruises evidence that she was touched in the way no one should be touched. But now, looking healthier than she's been in almost two weeks, skin flushed with happiness, injuries long since healed, El's well on her way to recovery. And if makes her happy,

Max supposes Mike can hang out with them for a while for the pre-sleep slumber party activities.

So, Max and El rope Mike into watching girly movies with them. He gives the token protests as he sits through “Sixteen Candles” and “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun”, but they take pity on him and throw in “Real Genius” in between them. And Max is surprised when El reaches for Mike’s hand with a bottle of nail polish in hand and begins painting his nails.

Max raises an eyebrow. “Seriously, Wheeler?” she says as El puts the first coat of a dark green polish on his nails.

Mike shrugs. “Nancy used to paint my nails when we were little. And Holly did it just a few weeks ago.”

Oh, right, Max forgets sometimes he has sisters even though, *duh*, Nancy. So, Max watches as El paints Mike’s nails and just giggles (this is the moment that Hopper pokes his head into El’s room to check on them. He takes one look at Mike’s still-in-progress-manicured hands, El holding the brush in one hand, Mike’s hand in the other, and closes the door without saying a word. Needless to say, Max loses her shit).

Mike goes home later, painted nails and all, leaving only after exchanging another round of deep, all-encompassing kisses with El, waiting until after midnight so he can say “Happy Birthday” and have it be on the actual day. Max watches as El closes the front door with one final trade of “I love you” and just shakes her head. “I swear, you two....” Max sighs.

El gives her a look. “Don’t you start.”

So, Max doesn’t and they head back upstairs, all giggles, not falling asleep until the wee hours of the morning.

And the next day, at El’s birthday party, Dustin manages to make an appearance, finally feeling up to leaving the house, and everyone hugs him, feeling ecstatic to see him up and about.

The core Party hangs out in the family room, a movie on in the

background that none of them are really paying attention to, all smiles and giggles and chattering. Nancy, Jonathan, and Steve are in deep conversation, smiling through it all as they huddle on the living room couch. And, in the kitchen, sitting at a table covered in pizza boxes, are Hopper and Joyce, with the newest addition of Karen Wheeler. There's presents and cake and laughter and happiness, so much happiness.

The Party's finally reunited, Max realizes and she smiles.

Just as it should be.

Just as it *always* should be.

Notes for the Chapter:

So, a bit of behind the scenes: this whole arc, from El getting taken to everyone recovering and spending time together, was only supposed to take two chapters.

Instead, it took five.

Gives you a sense of how much control I have over *any* of this (read: none, none at all).

I will say that it's all fluff and normal growing up from here on out, folks. Get ready for smooshiness...

(Side note: Mike and Max are *too much fun*. Seriously, one of my favorite combinations for dialogue)

19. Mar 15 - Apr 1986

Notes for the Chapter:

So, I have over compensated for the last 5 chapters of angst and h/c by going in the COMPLETE opposite direction.

Get ready for nothing but fluff, y'all.

Warning: some fairly hot and heavy necking ahead, folks (15 year olds, man - all those damn hormones). Nothing too crazy, but if this were still rated T, I'd be toeing the line a bit. So, I'd rate this chapter, like T + ?

Mar 15 - Apr 1986

El comes back to school the Monday after her 15th birthday, and Dustin the Wednesday after that. Each return sets off the rumor mill anew, but the Party, especially once fully reunited, does their best to ignore the noise.

They move as a single, cohesive untouchable unit through the halls of Hawkins High – even when not all of them are the same room, but *especially* when they are – not like nothing can hurt them, but like they know what it means to face losing each other and can't bear being farther apart than necessary.

*(they don't know this, none of them really do, but it all adds to the mystique of their small group and they don't realize that they're turning into something of a clique unto themselves, led by mike and el, the increasingly legendary couple of hawkins high. facing world-ending danger has aged them beyond their years, bringing a subconscious self-assurance that most teenagers aren't capable of. sure, there's still awkward hormones and teenage angst, and most of the party are still **giant ass** nerds, but there's **something** in the way the party carries themselves that sets them apart and makes others take notice. yes, they still have friends outside of the party, but there's an unbreakable bond between the six that is as of yet impossible to penetrate.)*

Wednesday, Jonathan and Nancy join the Party for lunch-

(wait, that's right, nancy and mike are siblings, aren't they? didn't she go out with steve harrington for, like, a year before dumping him for jonathan byers? man, she brought down king steve....)

-to celebrate Dustin's return and though everyone at Hawkins High thinks it's a strange a couple of seniors are eating lunch with a bunch of freshmen, no one does anything but whisper and gossip about the whole thing.

Naturally, as these things go, the rumors settle, but the mystery remains. The whispers mostly die down and the Party fully settles back into the dizzying rush of classes, homework, tests, and extracurriculars.

For Mike, it's like he blinks and whole weeks pass. It feels like every minute of every day is filled with something he needs to be doing – going to class, doing homework, studying for tests, going to Swim practice, doing chores. It's like he barely has time for anything outside of obligations. What spare time he does have is filled with spending time with the Party – planning the next campaign or playing video games or just hanging out. Consequently, he hasn't spent time alone with El in *days* outside of the occasional study session, as class projects and tests pick up in intensity and both of them care too much about their grades to cave into their hormones.

*(he dreams of summer, dreams of hours with nothing to do but spend time with her – **alone**, with no emergency or trauma to get in their way – and he craves it, craves the feel of unhurried kisses and dizzying caresses and the svelte warmth of her pressed up against him, sweet and intoxicating and **his**. god, he needs it like he needs air.)*

Still, it could be worse. There's a lot that Mike looks forward to, a lot that surprises him, that he enjoys. Swim team practice, which started back in the beginning of February and picks up as the first swim meet approaches, is one of those things. It surprises Mike – like, *really* surprises – that he likes Swim team as much as he does.

He's always enjoyed swimming whenever the Party has gone to the lake or he visits his grandparents in Florida. But he's never done laps

before and it's...hypnotic, soothing. His brain shuts off, the million mile per hour trains of thought come to a screeching halt and it's just...silent. Just him and his breathing and one stroke after the next.

It's the same with running, he comes to find – a sort of meditation where he can just *let go* and exist without the thousands of pressures that weigh down on him.

Plus, it gets him out of PE and saves him from death by embarrassment from his complete and utter lack of eye-hand coordination.

But, on Monday, April 9th, the day before his birthday, Swim practice is cut short when Brian Anders pukes in the pool (thankfully just after Mike got out of it) and Mike can't even bring himself to care, and this is why:

Mondays, Mike has Swim practice from 3:15 to 5. El, on the other hand, has Dance club from 3:30 to 4:30. On Mondays, when El gets out of Dance club, she waits for Mike to get out of Swim practice before they both head over to his house to work on homework and have dinner, the evening ending when Hop comes over to pick her up.

But it's 4:00 now. And he and El aren't expected to be at his house until 5:30.

Which means, once El gets out of Dance club, there's about a half an hour where they'll have nothing to do, no one to be with, nowhere to be. A half hour where they can be *alone*.

It's not much, but it's more exciting than anything in a long while. Like an early birthday present.

Mike can't stop himself from smiling like a fool as he stands by his locker, clean from his post-practice shower, hair still wet. Maybe he can convince El to sneak off somewhere and make out for half an hour...

...Who's he kidding? The second he tells El they have a half an hour to kill and that there might be kissing involved, she'll be the one

dragging *him* off, not the other way around.

But, now Mike has a half an hour with nothing to do but *wait*. He pouts for a second, impatience tugging at him insistently, before an idea pops into his brain and his pout turns into a grin.

A couple minutes later and Mike's walking into the Art classroom. There're a couple of students milling about, working on various projects, and none of them give him a second glance as he walks in. It takes him a bit to remember where everything is, but, soon, Mike has a pair of scissors, and two pieces of construction paper, one pink and one green.

Mike sits down at one of the studio tables and gets to work. "What are you doing, Wheeler?" one of the students asks, suddenly curious – it's not like Mike usually hangs out in the Art classroom if Will's not in here, too.

Mike looks over at the speaker – a sophomore, if Mike's memory serves correct, Peter something or other – and is mildly surprised the other kid knows his name. "Um, just making something for my girlfriend," he says, barely stumbling over the title. Because sometimes it surprises him, *still*, that El's his girlfriend.

"Yeah, you're still going out with El Hopper, aren't you?" the kid – Peter, Mike's sure of that – says before he smirks. "You lucky bastard. She's so fucking hot. How'd you land her, anyway?"

Mike grits his teeth against the flare of his temper. He *hates* it when other guys try to talk about El with him when she's not around – always making crass remarks or treating her like a piece of meat, like she's not a person who can make her own damn decisions. He wants to mouth off in response to Peter's question, but bites his tongue. He really, *really* doesn't want to risk getting detention or *worse*. "Just treated her like a human being," he says. *You should try it sometime*, he manages to hold back.

Mike must be giving off *something*, because Peter doesn't try to talk to Mike any further, giving him the space to concentrate.

15 minutes later, after carefully folding and snipping away at the

construction paper, he has a single, pink rose. Carefully holding it by the construction paper stem, Mike hurries to clean up and put away the scissors before he's off, heading down the hallways to where he knows the Dance club meets, one of the multipurpose rooms by the gym.

He gets there and sees a few small crowds of girls standing around in the hallway, duffle bags strung over shoulders, all dressed in leggings and wide-necked sweatshirts that hang off one shoulder, as they file out from the room Dance club is held in. Mike smiles – they must have just finished.

Mike pushes his way to the door and stops as he recognizes one of the girls, who's in his grade: Megan Shaughnessy. "Hey, Megan," he calls out, waiting until Megan turns to look at him before continuing. "Is El around?" *Man*, he used to have such a huge crush on Megan back when he was in 5th grade. He'd never been able to gather up the courage to talk to her. She'd been far too pretty, with her cornflower blonde hair and shining green eyes. Now, talking to her is like talking to anyone else. Sure Megan's still objectively pretty, but, well...*you know*.

Megan focuses on him and smiles. "Hey, Mike," she says. "Yeah, El's around. She's still in the studio, I'm pretty sure. Why?"

Mike holds up the construction paper flower and twirls it in between his thumb and forefinger. "Just wanted to give her something," he says with a smile.

Megan looks at the flower and giggles. "Aw, that's sweet," she says. "God, I remember when you were such a loser. Now look at you."

Mike feels both of his eyebrows push up onto his forehead. "Thanks?"

Megan blushes and cringes. "God, I'm sorry, that was mean. Go see your girlfriend, Mike. I'm sure she'll love the paper rose."

Mike gives her a small smile, the awkward moment passing. "Ok, see you around, Megan."

The door to what Mike guesses is the dance studio is propped open

and Mike slips inside. There are handful of girls still milling about, dance teacher nowhere to be seen. The leggings and sweatshirt must be a uniform or costume of some kind, because the rest of the girls are all wearing them, too. But the girls still in the studio are also wearing black high heels, some of them in the process of removing them to put them away with the rest of the girls' shoes, and Mike remembers that they're preparing for a dance performance in a couple of weeks. *Must be like a dress rehearsal or something.*

It doesn't take Mike long to spot El and, for a second, he just stands there and drinks in the sight of her. She's standing, chatting with another girl, face animated, lips upturned in a small smile. Her cheeks are flushed, her hair pulled back in a high ponytail, and she's wearing the same clothes all the other girls are wearing as she stands there, weight resting on one leg, hip jutting out, accentuating the curve of her waist, the length of her leg.

God, she's beautiful.

A few moments later, the other girl walks away after saying goodbye to El and Mike watches as El goes over to where her stuff is. She pulls off the gray sweatshirt, exposing a pale pink spandex tank top that, with the leggings she's wearing, clearly highlights the shape of her. Mike finds himself hypnotized by the sway of her hips, ponytail swinging in time with her steps. Jesus, how has he never made it a point to stop by after Dance club rehearsals before?

But then El stops by where her stuff is on the ground and bends over to grab her duffle bag and-

Jesus Christ. Mike looks away with a rush, flush spreading up and across his face, eyes closed so he can get a fucking grip. Because *that* image is now seared in his brain and Mike doesn't think it's going away anytime soon.

Mike takes a couple calming breathes before he opens his eyes back up, both relieved and disappointed to see that El is standing up straight. But he smiles. Now's his chance.

With El distracted by putting her things away, Mike crosses the dance studio, his long strides eating up the distance. And then he's behind

her, one arm wrapping around her waist to pull her against him, the hand holding the paper rose behind his back. "Hello, beautiful," he murmurs, leaning down to press a kiss to her neck. It's easier to reach the soft, smooth expanse of skin with her in heels and Mike grins, lips still lingering, her scent enveloping him.

"Mike!" El says with a giggle, turning around in a rush, her ponytail swinging and hitting him in the face. He doesn't even care. "What are you doing here?"

Mike kisses the tip of her nose, feeling playful. "Swim practice ended early," he says. "Someone threw up in the pool."

El's nose wrinkles. "Ew."

Mike laughs. "Yeah, thankfully I wasn't in it at the time."

El reaches up for him, her hands linking together behind his neck. "That's good. Nobody likes vomit." She lifts just a bit to give him a quick peck.

Mike wants to chase her lips as she settles back down, but he stays put. In due time.... "I got something for you," he says, voice quiet, unable to stop smiling.

"But it's *your* birthday tomorrow. Mine was a few weeks ago, remember? You already got me a birthday present," El says, but she's grinning, giddy excitement sparkling in her eyes.

"Don't need a reason," Mike says. He pulls his arm from behind his back and ducks his hand under her arm so he's holding the paper rose in the middle of the circle her arms make as they hold him close. "Ta da," he says softly.

El's gaze lands on the paper rose, her face softening, mouth parting just so. She glances up at him for half a second before she smiles and pulls one hand from behind his neck so she can take the pink flower. "For me?"

Mike can't help himself and he smiles. "No, made it for some other girl. Just wanted to show it to you first, see what you thought," he quips.

El mock glares at him before taking the hand that had been reaching for the flower and smacking him on the arm instead. "Mike!"

Mike laughs. "Kidding, kidding!" He leans over and kisses El's forehead. "Of course it's for you. *Always* for you."

And then El's looking back up at him, expression soft and loving once more. Her cheeks flush prettily and she takes the paper creation, holding it gently between her thumb and first two fingers. "Thank you, I love it."

"I love *you*," he says. And it's 100% the right thing to say because El pulls Mike down, her other hand still on the back of his neck, and kisses him sweetly. The arm that had been wrapped around her is now cradling her hip and his other hand comes down to mirror it, fingers curled around the curved slopes just beneath her waist, holding her close.

God, he loves this – he loves *her* – and he's overwhelmed with emotion, a potent and heady combination of love and happiness and *gratitude*. He's still very keenly aware of how close he came to losing her a few weeks ago and every moment he has with her feels like a gift he will never be able to repay, every moment one he always wants to cherish and never wants to waste.

Mike starts to pull away, but El refuses to let him and she deepens the kiss, mouth moving against his as her lips part. He feels the soft, sweet brush of her tongue against his lips and he groans, mouth opening against hers. One of his hands leaves her hips, sliding back and up to press against the small of her back. The heat of her bleeds through the thin spandex she's wearing and Mike draws gentle circles against the fabric with his thumb, feeling her shiver in response. He loves how sensitive, how *responsive* she is, like there's never anything he can do that's wrong.

Smiling against her lips, Mike pulls away. El lets out a small whine and he chuckles, eyebrow quirking. "Hey, so I was thinking," he starts, voice ragged with emotion.

El smiles. "Yeah?" she says, sounding a little breathless. Well, isn't *that* a little thrilling....

“We don’t need to be at my house until 5:30,” Mike says, leaning over to brush a soft kiss against her cheek. “And I have it on *very* good authority...” Another kiss, this one closer to her jaw. “That the A/V room is empty right now.” Lips now pressing against the corner of her jaw, her breath heavy in his ear, tickling. “And even though it’s locked.” He kisses her neck, unable to stop from grinning. “*Someone* here has the ability to unlock doors with her mind.” He kisses right under her ear, tugging on the lobe just a bit, enough to elicit a tiny, high-pitched whimper that makes Mike’s stomach do a weird flip. “Whaddya say? Wanna go make out with me in the A/V room?”

Mike pulls back just far enough to look down at El’s face, his breath catching in his throat at the heavy-lidded gaze she’s giving him, eyes darkening, and he has his answer.

Not five minutes later, Mike walks into the empty A/V room and flicks on the light. It’s not much more than an over-glorified storage closet, which it used to be until the Party reformed the Hawkins High A/V club and took over the space. Various pieces of electrical equipment line the walls and there’s an empty table in the middle with a couple of chairs around it.

But none of that matters as the door closes behind him with a decisive click and he finds himself being shoved against the door a little rougher than is strictly comfortable. There’s no time to complain even if he wanted to (which he doesn’t) before El’s pressed up against him and pulling him down for a heated kiss. *Jeez, someone’s eager...* is the last coherent thought Mike has before he kisses her back, one hand at her waist, the other pressed against her neck so her ear sits neatly in the curve between his thumb and forefinger.

El’s mouth is hot against his, soft yet firm, lips parted and inviting, tongue beckoning. Mike lets her in, giving as good as he gets, fingers slipping beneath the hem of her tank top. His hand creeps up until

his whole palm is pressed against the small of her back, skin hot beneath his touch, and he can't stop the way his fingers brush against her skin, like silk beneath his caress. El gasps against his mouth and presses herself even harder against him, body curving into his until there's not even a millimeter of space between them.

This is what he needs, what he's been craving, *missing*. Her – just her and nothing else.

For a few minutes, there's nothing except the sounds of their mouths meeting over and over, breathy sighs, and equally breathless gasps.

El drags her mouth from Mike's, lips trailing down his chin to press against his jaw. Mike can't help the way he groans, eyes sliding shut, as her lips glide up the length of his jaw, leaving a string of suckling kisses in her wake. Mike tips his head back, breathing hard, as her lips press just on the underside of his jaw, at the corner. God, she's just at the perfect height to do this and the feel of her lips against his skin is intoxicating.

And then he feels her teeth scrape against the column of his neck, lips soothing with a suckling kiss soon after. Mike pulls a sharp breath through clenched teeth before he lets out a sound that is somewhere between a moan and a whimper because *holy shit*, that feels good....

Mike's head falls back against the door, chin tipping up to give El the space to continue working whatever magic she's using on him. The hand under her shirt curls against her skin, fingers digging into the flesh, and he reaches with his other hand for the fabric-covered elastic that holds her hair up in a ponytail, pulling on it until it's free from her hair. He drops the band to the ground and weaves his fingers through her hair – anything to anchor himself against the onslaught of *feeling* that washes over him.

El moves down the length of his neck, the one-two punch of the sting of her teeth followed by the softness of her mouth driving him absolutely crazy. He feels like he's going to fly apart, dissolve into his composite atoms and just melt away into a pool of pure sensation. He feels warm all over – *too* warm – and he's rapidly losing the ability to catch his breath. But none of that matters as long as El *never* stops doing what she's doing.

Her fingers curl into the fabric of his polo shirt, tugging down, and her mouth leaves his skin just long enough for her to nose away his collar. And then her teeth nip at the space between his collarbones, right beneath his adam's apple, and Mike swallows, *hard*. "Holy shit, El," he breathes. There are no words to convey what he's feeling, to adequately describe just how blissfully overwhelmed he is.

But El hums against his skin like she understands. And then she places an open-mouthed kiss along his collarbone, tongue flicking against his skin, and all thought flees Mike's brain entirely. She moves along the length of his collarbone, moving steadily out towards his shoulder, mouth hot against his skin, until she gets to where his collarbone meets near the junction of his neck and shoulder and – *sweet Jesus*.

Mike actually moans this time, chest heaving as he pants hard against her, unable to catch his breath. And he would have been embarrassed at the sound if this didn't feel *so damn good*. Because El's mouth is open against his skin as she sucks *hard* on the flesh between his collarbone, neck, and shoulder, her tongue brushing against the spot in soothing contrast to the pleasurable sting the pressure of her mouth is inducing as she marks him.

It's too much – god, it's *way* too much – and Mike's fingers tighten in her hair, practically fisting around the locks. And moments later, he has to pull her away because he can't, he just *can't*.

Mike catches a quick glimpse of El's disappointed face, a sound that is something between a whine and a question emanating from her throat and reaching his ears, as he leans down and kisses her *hard*. El surges up against him, returning the bruising kiss, both of them moaning at the contact.

Holding on to her, Mike pushes away from the door and, lips never leaving hers, guides El backwards towards the center of the room. There's a bit of fumbling as he reaches for one of the chairs, but then he turns and sits down – well, more like *falls* down, the legs of the chair scraping hard against the tile with the impact – before pulling El down with him, his mouth only leaving hers for a moment as she seats herself across his lap, legs dangling off to one side.

And then they're kissing again, her weight leaning against him, warm and delectable. Both of his hands are back at her waist, just under her tank top, hands spanning the skin just above her leggings. His thumbs rub against the bare curve of her waist and El shivers, gasping as she presses even harder against him.

Now it's Mike's turn to lead trails of kisses across skin. El's warm and soft beneath his mouth, pulse point jumping against his lips as he kisses her neck. Mike breathes her in, nostrils filling with the smell of clean sweat and the lingering perfume of her shampoo and he can't help the way he groans against her neck.

His lips glide against her skin, inching first down the front of her neck, stopping for a long while to kiss and nibble at the skin where her neck meets her shoulder, and then trailing back up the side, skin smooth over taut tendons and muscle. God, she tastes *so good*. There's nothing even identifiable that he can pick out, but the all he knows is he's rapidly becoming addicted to the feel of her skin beneath his lips, the taste of her on his tongue.

El gasps and whimpers against him, a symphony of sound only for him that has him shivering with just how *good* it sounds, all skittering pleasure up and down his spine. Her hands rest on his torso, moving across his chest and ribcage, her touch leaving his skin tingling in its wake, even through the fabric of his shirt.

But Mike's hands aren't sitting idle. As he kisses higher and higher up her neck, his hands inch their way up her waist, fabric of her tank top bunching against his wrists, until the bottom curve of her ribcage is nestled against his palms. He can *feel* her breathing, ribs expanding and contracting with each heaving breath. His thumbs rest against the edge of her bottom ribs, tips resting where her ribs meet her sternum.

And, *god*, it would be so easy to move his hands just a few inches higher, touch her where he's never touched her before – where he's never touched *anyone* before – but he doesn't. Not now. Not yet.

Instead, he focuses on where he's kissing her, lips on her neck, moving higher until his mouth is right on the spot that he knows drives her crazy, the patch of skin right beneath her ear and behind

the corner of her jaw. He nips the skin there – *ha, payback's a bitch* – and is rewarded with a high-pitched gasp before he fixes his mouth to the spot, sucking hard on the skin, trying to mark her the same way he's pretty sure she marked him.

“Mike!” El gasps, fingers curling in his shirt, nails scraping against him through his shirt. She squirms in his lap, arching against him as she tips her head back even further, whimpering, and-

-*Whoa. God, yes.* Ok, ok, wait, *holy shit.*

His hands trail back down her sides to grab her hips, holding her still, as Mike pulls his mouth away from her neck, gasping at how his lips suddenly feel bereft. He's breathing hard, blood hot in his veins, beneath his skin, making him dizzy, and he leans forward, forehead coming down to press against hers.

El's breathing just as hard and Mike opens his eyes to see her looking at him, gaze questioning through the haze that darkens her eyes and brings a flush to her cheeks. God, she's beautiful – rosy skin, lips swollen, hair lush and wild with curls. For a moment, he actually can't breathe, he's so blown away.

“Mike?” El asks, voice light and breathy, asking so much with just the utterance of his name. *Are you ok? Why'd you stop? What's going on?*

Mike smiles and breaths out a silent chuckle. “Getting a little carried away in here.”

El smiles, lips gently curving. “Your idea,” she says, lightly chastising.

Mike laughs. “Not regretting it, just pointing it out.”

El laughs in return, the sound more of a giggle, and lifts a hand from his chest. She reaches out with gentle fingers to brush away the hair that's fallen across his forehead, still a bit damp from his earlier shower, before her fingers trace a path from his eyebrow down to his cheek. Her palm comes to rest against his face, fingertips gentle against his skin. She smiles even wider and Mike finds himself easily captivated as happens so often with her.

And then El leans forward, hand holding his face steady, and kisses

him sweet and slow – no urgency, no further goal, just her lips pressed against his.

I love you, Mike Wheeler, she whispers into his mind, never breaking the kiss.

I love you, too, El Hopper, he returns, feeling like his heart's going to burst from his chest. The burning in his veins fades into a gentle warmth, the feeling of having her near, of being with her, of loving her and knowing she loves him in return. He could stay like this forever and be perfectly happy-

-And then his watch beeps. It's 5 o'clock, the moment over.

Time for them to go.

Mike and El sport matching hickeys for a few days after their impromptu and illicit rendezvous in the A/V room, El using concealer to mask the one on her neck just under ear and Mike making sure to wear collared shirts to hide the spot on his collarbone.

But, naturally, word gets out. Someone spots El touching up her concealer in the girl's bathroom and, well, Mike has to take his shirt off for Swim practice. And, within hours it seems like, half the school knows and neither Mike nor El can walk down the hallway without giggling whispers in their wake. They can ignore that, though.

What they can't ignore is the incredible amount of shit the rest of the Party gives them (*cough* Dustin *cough*).

They're all at lunch on Thursday when El gets up 5 minutes before the bell rings. She has Biology with Mike right after, but she needs to grab something from her locker and still have enough time to ask Mr. Reynolds a question about the homework. "Hey, I'm going to head early to Bio," she says, more for Mike than anyone.

Mike looks up at her, like the rest of the Party does, but El only notices Mike. It's hard not to when she's *still* thinking about their half

hour alone in the A/V room a few days ago. Hell, she's probably going to be thinking about that for days to come. "Want some company?" Mike asks, gathering his things in anticipation of her answer.

"No, why would I want my boyfriend to walk with me to the class that we both share?" El says, smile belying her words.

Mike grins and stands. "See you later, guys," he says to the table.

"Don't forget to take the time to refresh that hickey, Michael. It's looking a little faded," Dustin says, lips stretched with his usual shit-eating grin.

"Heh, nice one," Lucas says with a chuckle.

Mike flips them off and opens his mouth to say something, but El grabs him by the arm and starts dragging him away. "Say goodbye, Mike," she says.

"Bye, assholes," Mike calls over his shoulder.

El rolls her eyes. "Come on, Mike," she says as they get a bit of distance between them and the table with the rest of their friends.

"Sorry, but Dustin makes everything awkward," Mike says, shifting his hand to grab hers once their garbage is thrown away, fingers lacing together.

"No, Dustin is Dustin. *You* make things awkward," El says.

El knows Mike is chewing over her words as a silence stretches over them that lasts until they're at El's locker. "It's just..." Mike sighs and leans against the lockers, turned towards her, shoulder pressed against the metal. Standing there, leaning like that, one foot crossed over the other, wearing dark blue jeans and a white and black striped polo, emphasizes the long, lean lines of his body in a way that El especially likes.

Then he crosses his arms over his chest, which does, um, *interesting* things to his upper arms and shoulders, and shakes his head to toss his hair away from where it's hanging over his eyes and he looks so

devil-may-care and *cool*, that El's heart skips a beat in her chest. God, he has no idea just how *pretty* he is, does he?

But then she remembers that Mike never finished his sentence. "It's just what?"

El keeps an eye on the inside of her locker while she focuses on Mike, watching as he rolls his eyes. "It's just that, the way he says those things, makes it sound like we can't keep our hands to ourselves."

El giggles and she grins over at him. "Mike, we *can't*."

Mike blushes and looks down at his feet, scuffing one toe against the floor. "Difference between *can't* and *won't*," he mutters. Then he's looking back at her, blush fading. "But he makes it sound like that's all there is to what you and I have and it's *not* and he should know better than anyone. Like, he was there for the year you were gone and he knew how miserable I was and it wasn't just because I couldn't kiss you or touch you or anything." He huffs a deep sigh. "I love you, El. And it's so much more than just physical stuff."

El smiles, heart skipping a few beats, hand pausing on its way to grab her biology book. "I think he's just envious," she says. "And that's why he teases. You shouldn't take it so personally, Mike."

Mike smiles and gives her a look through his eyelashes that makes her want to reach over and kiss him. "Yeah, I guess. I'll-

El's biology book, which she had been grabbing, had been hanging precariously on the edge of the top shelf of El's locker when gravity wins out and causes it to fall. On instinct, El reaches out with her powers, the book halting in mid-air inches from the underside of the shelf.

Then she remembers she's at school and her eyes go wide and she rushes to grab the book. Mike's at her side in an instant, like he can shield her from anyone who could have been looking. "Shit, shit," he breathes. El looks up, looks around, to see if anyone saw, her heart pounding in her chest. Mike's doing the same and he lets out a shaky breath, seeing what El's seeing: there's only a handful of people in the hallway, seeing how the bell hasn't rung yet, and no one's looking

in their direction. "I don't think anyone saw," Mike says, quiet.

"You sure?" El says, looking around and trying not to seem so conspicuous.

"Yeah, pretty sure."

El closes her locker and leans against it, forehead against the cool metal, and sighs. "Oh, god..."

She feels Mike's hands her shoulders, turning her and pulling her to him. "Hey, it's ok," he says, one arm wrapping around her shoulders. El lets herself lean against his chest, burying her face in his shirt for a second and taking strength and comfort from the warmth of him. "We'll just be more careful next time." Like her powers are something they both share, a burden they both need to carry.

Mike presses a kiss to the top of El's head before he pulls back, grabbing her by the hand. "C'mon, let's get to Bio." He tugs her down the hall and El follows, hurrying to walk by his side.

"Oh, hey," Mike says after a silent moment. "Did you want to come to the swim meet on Saturday?"

El looks up and over at him, eyebrow arching in question. "Are you swimming in this one?" The last swim meet, a couple of weeks ago, Mike hadn't been in the rotation for any of the races.

Mike grins. "Yeah, Coach Trevor's putting me in for the 200 meter Free."

El smiles, proud and happy for him. "That's great, Mike. Of course I'll go. Hey, maybe we can arrange for the whole Party to be there to cheer you on."

Mike cringes. "Oh god, please don't. Like, Will might be ok, but the rest of them will just...ugh, no."

El's smile turns mischievous. "We'll see."

Two days later, El, Will, and Max are sitting on the half-filled bleachers that surround the Hawkins High swimming pool. There are families and other students, both from Hawkins and from other schools, wandering around to find seats and chat in small groups.

Both Lucas and Dustin had passed on coming, not wanting to wake up to be at school at 10:00 on a Saturday morning. Will agreed to come to support Mike and Max, well...Max decided to come because, and El can quote, "Wet, half naked guys? I'm there."

"So, what time does this thing *really* start?" Max asks, reaching over to grab a handful of the trail mix El made and brought to snack on.

"Should be soon, I would think," Will says. "Looks like people are starting to settle down and – ooh, look – some of the swimmers are here."

"Ooh, hello," Max says, almost under her breath, and El turns to look. A gaggle of guys stands just off to the side, all wearing speedos or tight swim shorts and nothing else, all of them looking like they'd just come from the shower, hair slicked back, skin wet.

"Are those the JV swimmers?" El asks. Mike's on the JV team and she wants to make sure she's paying attention for when his race starts.

"Don't know, don't care," Max says.

El looks over at Max's face and there's a strange grin on that stretches the redhead's lips. El looks back and forth between the swimmers and Max before she realizes that Max is checking them out. Eyebrow arching, El looks back over at the assembled group of athletes.

Yeah, she guesses they're all somewhat attractive (at least from the neck down; some of those faces, on the other hand...). At the very least, they're all in shape, some bulkier than others, each one aesthetically pleasing. El looks at them and can appreciate the muscles and the lines and the way they hold themselves. It's the same with movie stars and celebrities – El can find them attractive, but not *be* attracted to them.

“Yeah, I think these are the JV swimmers,” Will says in answer to El’s question. “I recognize some of the guys from the freshman and sophomore classes. Oh, hey, look, there’s Mike!”

Will points and El follows the line of his finger eagerly. She hasn’t seen Mike at all today and she just likes looking at him, likes being able to see him and-

Oh.

Oh.

Mike’s standing just off to the side with the other swimmers from Hawkins High, chatting with one of his teammates. A small towel hangs around his neck and he’s holding the ends in loose fists, using his elbows to gesture as he talks and laughs. He’s a little nervous, limbs a bit jittery, unable to stop shifting his weight back and forth from one foot to the other.

But this really isn’t what El’s paying attention to. Like, *at all*.

The last time El saw Mike in a bathing suit was the previous summer, before he’d started Cross Country, conditioning for the Swim Team, and actually swimming for the Swim Team. Then, he’d been gangly, body stretched thin by the growth spurts he’d gone through over the past year, the rest of him still needing to catch up. Also, El hadn’t been ready to appreciate her shirtless boyfriend.

Now, well...

Mike’s still lanky, tall and thin, but El’s captivated. He’s standing there wearing tight navy blue swim shorts that hang low on his hips, the hems hitting mid-thigh, and El’s brain just *freezes*. He’s not bulky, not like some of the other boys, but he’s not as gangly as he once was. And there’s something *so very* pleasing about the sight of him – the way his shoulders transition into his upper arms, the lines of his torso from ribcage to hips, the taper of his wrists that flares out into his palms, the way his skin stretches taut over his collarbones and neck.

El wants to touch *all of it*, hands itching to run over each inch of

exposed skin. Suddenly, it feels like she's floating, air thick and languid around her, and hot – *too* hot.

"Hey, El, you ok?" It's Will's voice, but El's too transfixed to respond.

Max laughs. "God, Wheeler really gets your motor running, doesn't he?" she says, nudging El with her shoulder.

The jostle breaks the spell that's been woven over El and she turns to look at Max. "What?" Her mouth feels dry and the phrase Max used is unfamiliar.

"He turns you on," Max explains. "Like, you're sexually attracted to him."

"God, I don't want to hear this," Will says, groaning from El's other side.

"Hmm," is all El says, a non-answer at best, but Max seems to accept it.

The swim meet goes by in a blur.

Mike gets fourth place in his race – not a bad showing for a freshman on his first time out – and after it's all over, Mike clean and showered, hair slicked back, wearing regular clothes (*damn*, some portion of El's brain mourns), the 4 of them head to the diner by the arcade to meet Lucas and Dustin for a post-Swim-meet lunch.

Max and Will are walking in front of Mike and, the two chatting animatedly about something El's not really listening to. No, she's still too busy thinking about Mike without his shirt on, thinking about running her hands across his arms and torso, palm to skin.

Then she feels a squeeze of her hand, the one Mike's holding, and El turns to look up at him. "Yeah?" she says.

Mike smiles. "Everything ok? You're, like, a million miles away."

He's smiling down at her, so nice and handsome, that El can't help the words that come out of her mouth. "I like it when you're not wearing a shirt," she blurts out.

Mike stops walking, mouth hanging open, blush creeping up his cheeks. But it's nothing compared to the way embarrassment reddens El's skin, flush taking over her cheeks and neck. God, she can't believe she just said that....

"I like it when you're not wearing a shirt, too," Mike says in a rush. El's embarrassment cuts short, amusement taking over. Because she's never been shirtless in front of him...at least, not in the context they're talking about. And El arches an eyebrow, watching with an amused smile as Mike's blush just deepens. "I mean, I will. When it happens." His eyes widen. "IF, if it happens – totally up to you – I don't want to presume. I mean, I hope - I've thought about-" He sighs, cringing, frustrated as he digs himself deeper. "You know what? I - and..." El's trying to hold back her giggles; god, she's never seen Mike this tongue-tied before and it's *hilarious*.

Mike lets out a groan and brings his free hand up to cover his eyes. "Please, just put me out of my misery. It would be a mercy at this point, I promise."

El can't stop the giggles anymore and she's laughing as she reaches up for the hand that covers Mike's face. "Then who would see me without my shirt on?"

Mike lets El pull his hand away and the look he's giving her is a complicated one – embarrassment, attraction, but mostly exasperated deadpan. "You're not helping the situation any."

El shrugs. "Well, technically, I started the situation, so, it's all my fault."

Mike guffaws and smiles. "Yes!" he crows. "It *is* all your fault." He smirks, proud. "You like me without my shirt on."

El rolls her eyes. "No one likes a braggart, Michael," she chastises, eyebrow arching, as she stands up on her toes, tugging him down by his wrists so she can kiss him.

Mike kisses her back eagerly, the two of them giggling against each other's lips. His hand comes up, fingers in her hair, and her fingers are still wrapped around his wrist and it's all so *perfect*....

“God, are you two making out *again*? Is it like an affliction, or something? Like you can’t go without kissing for X number of hours or you’ll die or shit like that?”

The sound of Max’s voice makes Mike and El laugh just that much harder, kiss ending as the laughter bubbles out of them. “Something like that,” Mike says, smiling down at El and she’s smiling back at him, so happy her face hurts with the force of her smile.

Then El tugs on Mike’s hand, pulling him down the street to rejoin Max and Will. “C’mon, I want pie and fries,” she says.

Mike chuckles. “Well, then, let’s get the lady pie and fries,” he says, pulling her into his side so he can wrap his arm around her shoulders, pressing a quick kiss to the top of her head as she settles into his side. El goes gladly and sends a “thank you” out into the universe for letting her get to experience this.

Because it’s all so damn perfect.

April rolls by, days getting longer, temperatures warming up, like a preview for the heat of summer.

Jim and Joyce are spending a rare moment alone on the front porch of Jim’s house, sitting on the recently installed porch swing that El insisted on getting. Jim never thought of himself as a porch swing kind of guy, but sitting here with Joyce, her pressed against his side, tucked under his arm, as they gently swing back and forth – well, Jim finds himself open to becoming a porch swing kind of guy.

Faintly, in the background, he can hear the sounds of El and Will talking as they do their homework in the kitchen. It’s a Thursday night – a school night – and the kitchen is the perfect place for two 15 year olds to spread out and work.

This whole thing feels so fucking domestic – kids doing homework, parents relaxing after dinner – that Jim’s heart gives a painful

squeeze in his chest. God, he wants this *always*.

“This is nice,” Joyce says, voice quiet.

And it is. It’s a nice spring evening, sun just setting, warmth lingering in the air. It’s quiet and calm and perfect.

Jim knows the words that are going to come out of his mouth a minute before he says them.

He’s keenly aware of the small jewelry box that’s sitting upstairs in his nightstand drawer, conveniently not in arm’s reach. Jim’s been waiting for the right moment to ask Joyce to marry him for the last month or so and, of course when it happens, the ring’s not with him.

Too bad El can’t float it out to him, or something.

She would, too, in an instant, if he had a way of letting her know. El’s been dropping hints over the past several weeks about him and Joyce getting married. Just the other day, in fact, she was nudging and suggesting, and none too subtly, as they ate breakfast. (“This place needs a woman’s touch.” – “Well, you’re a woman. Why don’t you get on that?” – “Ugh, Dad.”)

(that’s a new thing for el and jim, her calling him dad. the first time it happened, it was days after he got her back from brenner and his heart almost stopped and threatened to explode in his chest from sheer happiness. el uses it more and more, not all the time, but without thinking when she does. it makes jim happier than he sometimes feels he has any right to be.)

But, El’s not here to help him, so Jim’s on his own.

And then he speaks.

“Marry me.”

It’s not a question, because he knows what her answer will be. He and Joyce have been around the block too many times for him not to know.

But it doesn’t stop his heart from pounding in his chest anyway.

Jim hears her gasp and she lifts her head from his shoulder, turning to look at him with her mouth open, eyes wide. “Are you sure?”

Jim grins. “Got a ring upstairs in my nightstand drawer. Been trying to find a good moment to ask for weeks.”

It only takes Joyce a second longer before her face breaks into a sparkling smile, her eyes shining. “I’d love to marry you,” she says. And then she’s leaning in to kiss him, her mouth warm and soft against his. Joyce is giggling as she kisses him – *fucking* giggling – and Jim can’t help but smile into the kiss.

Yeah, this is good.

So *fucking* good.

Notes for the Chapter:

I had plans, y'all. I really did. I had 9 "scenes" I wanted to get through for this chapter, that I *thought* I could get through.

I got through 3 of them.

Yay?

20. Apr - Aug 1986

Notes for the Chapter:

Whee! So, this is earlier than I thought it would be!

(y'all can thank EvieSmallwood for this being finished a day earlier than expected, fyi. she *~*challenged*~* me and *apparently* i respond well to pressure. makes me scared of this relationship going forward..

...LOL JK. ILY BABE)

Warning: more serious making out ahead. I swear, these two kids *cannot* keep their hands to themselves...

Apr - Aug 1986

Spring explodes with a tidal wave of happiness and Joyce lets it carry her away, lets herself get swept up in the giddy, bubbly feeling. It's like she's 10 years younger, her heart's so light, like she's reached the light at the end of the tunnel and it's brighter than the sun and warm with love and safety and comfort.

Because Joyce Byers is going to marry Jim Hopper and she's so damn happy, she doesn't know what to do with herself.

The kids are the first to find out, well before Jim and Joyce have figured out any of it, like *where* or *when*. But there's time for that, though Joyce knows part of the answer to *when* is *soon*.

El, to no one's surprise, is *ecstatic*. She gives both Joyce and Jim full body hugs, immediately launching into a million questions about the wedding ceremony and when it'll be and can she be part and will she need a new dress, until Jim pretty much tells her to quit bugging them with questions. Doesn't put a dent in El's excitement, though, and Joyce finds that's El's enthusiasm is contagious. Makes it start to seem *real*.

Will's reaction is quieter, but no less happy. Joyce knows her son, knows how to read him, and the look on his face when he hears the news is a story of emotions. Happiness, relief, questioning, love. She doesn't miss the way he looks first at El and then at Jim and *sighs*, like the world has righted itself into the way it should be. Will gives her a hug and a whispered "I'm so happy for you, Mom" before he goes over to Jim. There's a moment, a pause, Will sizing Jim up, before he launches himself at the older man, his soon-to-be step-dad.

It takes all of Joyce's willpower to hold back both the tears from seeing her son so welcoming and accepting and the laughter from the look on Jim's face as Will hugs him, like he's not sure what to be doing with his arms full of a happy teenager who's not El.

But, by far, it is Jonathan's reaction that gets to Joyce the most. Jonathan, who's heading to New York in August with Nancy, her going to Columbia, him to NYU. Jonathan, who's been fretting in all the silent ways Joyce knows how to read about leaving her and Will alone. Jonathan, who's been taking care of Will since long before Lonnie walked out. Jonathan, who stepped up to become a second parent to his younger brother and grew up way too fast as a result.

Because when Joyce tells Jonathan, the same night she tells the others, the same night Jim proposes, for a moment Jonathan just folds in on himself. His shoulders slump, like air out of an inner-tube. But it's quick and when he looks back up at Joyce, he's smiling, sheen of tears in his eyes. It's *relief* and happiness and gratitude, worry leaving him. Because Jonathan knows Jim, knows that Jim will take care of Joyce and Will in his absence.

And when Joyce hugs Jonathan, overwhelmed at the emotion emanating from her son, he hugs her back, tight. "That's great, Mom. *Really*," he says, quiet in the way Jonathan is. "I'm so happy for you. Hopper's a great guy."

It's this moment that Joyce decides the wedding needs to be before Jonathan goes off to college, which gives her roughly 4 months to plan.

Joyce isn't too worried, though. She and Jim don't need anything crazy extravagant. Both of them are fairly private people, which cuts

down on the guest list. And she doesn't need, doesn't *want*, anything fancy.

"Are you sure?" Jim asks when she tells him she wants simple. "I have money, Joyce. We can do something nice, if you want."

Joyce shakes her head, smiling all the while. "It'll be nice no matter what, Jim, don't worry about that. But it doesn't need to break the bank." Joyce is too used to pinching every penny to start wasting money now.

Still, Jim insists on giving her the money she needs to buy a dress for both her and for El. This, Joyce will accept. Because even though this is her second wedding and she's on the wrong side of 35, Joyce, like all women, wants to look beautiful on her wedding day.

Her wedding day. To Jim.

If anyone had come up to Joyce Byers any time before the last couple of years and told her that she'd be marrying Jim Hopper, she'd have told them they were pulling her leg.

But, here she is. And it's surreal in the best way.

Somehow, because it's Hawkins, the news spreads like wildfire (though, if Joyce has to guess, it took the El-Mike-Karen route and once Karen knows something, *everyone* knows it).

People who haven't spoken to her in what feels like years are coming up to her, congratulating her, asking her when the big day is and, of course, asking to see the ring.

The ring is *perfect* and Joyce has to admit that showing it off is one of the best parts of being engaged. It's a single stone, set in white gold, and it's just lovely – not too big or flashy, but a beautiful square cut. It catches the light of the sun so easily and Joyce gets distracted every once in a while by the sight of it, by the sparkle, and it's a physical reminder of Jim that she carries with her wherever she goes now.

But, of course, there's still the wedding to plan and it doesn't take Joyce and Jim long to settle on the details: on Saturday, August 9th,

they decide, Jim and Joyce will be married in a simple backyard wedding at the soon-to-be Hopper-Byers household. The wedding will be small, close friends and family only. Karen offers to help arrange food and cake while Nancy volunteers to help decorate (El jumps in, too, wanting to help make everything perfect).

It's the end of May, the school year coming to a close, graduation right around the corner, when Joyce asks El if she wants to go dress shopping in Indianapolis.

"It can be a girl's day," Joyce says. "Just you and me."

El smiles from across the kitchen table at Jim's house on a Thursday morning in late May, the expression bright and happy. Joyce and Will have been moving in slowly, staying over more and more often; the guest room has all but been converted into Will's room and the small office has been relegated to guest room status.

It's mostly only Jonathan at the old house, now, since he's moving out for college in a few short months. And when Nancy stays the night, which happens about half the time, Joyce just pretends to look in the other direction. He's almost out of the house; it's about time for him to get in some teenage rebellion before he goes.

"That sounds great!" El exclaims. "When can we go?"

"I'm off on Sunday," Joyce says. "Unless you and Mike have plans...."

El laughs and shakes her head, curls bouncing around her shoulders in a way that Joyce would be jealous of if she was El's age. "No, not yet. I'd cancel if we did, though. I want to help make sure you look beautiful when you get married."

The words curl around Joyce's heart, warm and tight, and Joyce stands up to give El a hug from where she's still sitting, pressing a soft kiss on top of El's head. "Thank you, sweetheart."

A few days later, Joyce and El are on their way to Indianapolis in Joyce's station wagon. The sky's hazy with thin clouds and there's a mild breeze in the air. In the passenger seat, El fiddles with the radio, finding some pop station that has her bopping along with the beat. Joyce smiles, amused. Is this what it's like to have a daughter?

"So, sweetheart, how's school going?" Joyce asks.

"It's good," El says. "We have finals coming up in a few weeks and I started studying for those already. Looking forward to summer vacation, though."

Joyce grins. "And spending time with Mike?"

Out of the corner of Joyce's eye, she can see El blushing a bit. "And the rest of the Party," El says. "But, yeah, Mike."

"You two are pretty serious, aren't you?" It's a gentle question, not an accusatory, disapproving one. Joyce is keenly aware of how young Mike and El are, aware that most kids their age, most teenagers, confuse hormones and lust with being in love with each other. But Joyce is equally aware of what both Mike and El have been through and knows they're both so much older than their 15 years would suggest.

So, when El says "I love him. And he loves me, too," Joyce knows it's the truth, knows it's not just teenage puppy love. She's seen them around each other, especially when El came back into everyone's lives and right after she was taken, has seen just how much and how deeply they feel for each other.

And it gets Joyce thinking, thinking about how far Mike and El have gone in their relationship. She knows they make out on a regular basis – the other kids, including Will, tease them about it enough at any rate – but beyond that? Joyce isn't sure.

But she remembers being 15, remembers *losing her virginity* at 15 and wants to make sure, at the very least, that Mike and El are being safe.

Joyce hesitates, though. El technically isn't her daughter yet. And,

even though Joyce was the one Jim called when El got her period the previous summer, this is a whole bigger conversation to have, one maybe not suited until she's talked to Jim, until after her and Jim get married. Because, really, the last thing Joyce needs to have it somehow get back to Jim that she talked to El about sex behind his back.

So, Joyce shelves it, files it away for another day. Not too far in the future, though; Joyce is under no illusions that, if Mike and El haven't already had sex, the day they do is not too far off. And, well, Joyce wants to make sure they're being safe, that they're protected.

Because, god knows, they're going to eventually do it regardless.

Focusing back on El, Joyce smiles and leans over just enough to lay a hand on El's forearm. "I'm so happy for you, El," she says and means it. El deserves every ounce of happiness after everything she's been through. Joyce lets out a light laugh. "Maybe, one day, it'll be you and Mike getting married."

"It will," El says, quiet but confident. Like there's no other possible outcome for the two of them.

"Well, you can practice planning your own wedding by helping me with mine, yeah?" Joyce says with a conspiratorial wink. "Just don't tell your father. Fathers are never ready to hear about their daughters getting married."

El giggles. "It'd probably make him all red faced."

"And his nostrils would flare just so," Joyce agrees. Together, they spend the next few minutes teasing Jim behind his back before transitioning to other topics – El's dance class, stories from Joyce's work, stories from Joyce's *past*, plans El has for the future, both big and small – and, in what feels like no time at all, Joyce is pulling into the parking lot of one of the malls in Indianapolis.

The second they're out of the car, El links arms with Joyce and Joyce can't stop smiling as they enter the mall and make their way to Macy's.

5 minutes later, Joyce finds a sales person in the Women's Dresses department and all it takes is saying the magic words before they're whisked away for dress fittings: "I'm getting married in August and my future step-daughter and I need dresses."

The saleswoman attending them is all smiles and cooing giggles as she asks Joyce and El questions, trying to figure out what Joyce is looking for, what kind of dress El needs – "Depends on if she's a flower girl or a bridesmaid. Or something in between, even!" the saleswoman exclaims.

The next few hours pass by in a flurry of satin and tulle, lace and rhinestones. Joyce has never seen so many beautiful dresses in one place in her entire life and, in the beginning, is content to sit back and help El find a dress before moving on to find her own wedding dress.

Watching El try on dresses, like she's playing dress up, is heart-warming and sweet. It makes Joyce so happy to see her smiling and giggling, trying on dress after dress, looking radiant in almost all of them. And it's striking to Joyce just how much of a beautiful young woman El is turning into and Joyce has to hold back a giggle at the thought that comes to her. If El weren't deeply in love and committed to Mike, Jim would probably have a heart attack trying to beat the boys away. As it is, Joyce has heard hints from Will that a lot of the guys at school think El is really attractive, but that they stay away because Mike and El are, in Will's words "like, the most legendary couple ever".

It takes a little while, but they eventually settle on a dress for El and Joyce finds herself standing to get a closer look at the girl. "Oh, honey, it's beautiful," Joyce says, softly, coming to stand behind El in the mirror.

"Yeah?" El asks as she stands, barefoot, twirling this way and that in the dress, trying to inspect her reflection.

"You look like a princess," Joyce says and it's true.

The dress is a deep, raspberry pink, sleeveless, hem hitting El's legs just at the knee. A soft tulle skirt flares from the fitted waist, and the

satin, sweetheart neckline shows off the sweep of El's collarbones, the lines of her shoulders. The dress would be strapless if not for the sheer lace above the neckline, lace wrapping up and over her shoulders before the satin starts again just underneath her shoulder blades. The lace is embroidered with rhinestones arranged in a floral pattern, covering the bodice and dripping down like flower boughs onto the skirt over the tulle beneath. A ribbon cinches the waist, tied delicately in the back just below the zipper, dividing the dress at the waist.

"Like a princess?" El asks, smiling despite the sheen of tears in her eyes.

"You're going to blow Mike away when he sees you," Joyce says, squeezing El's shoulders.

The words bring a giddiness to El's smile that is only dampened when El has to take the dress off so it can go back on the hanger, turning wistful and hopeful all at the same time.

But El perks up again when she realizes it's Joyce's turn to try on dresses – *wedding* dresses – and it's with a cute series of giggles that El plops down in the spot Joyce was just sitting in and declares, "Your turn!"

And then it is, indeed, Joyce's turn to be dressed up over and over, in dresses in colors of white and ivory and off-white, with tulle and satin and lace, in all sorts of styles and cuts imaginable.

It wasn't like this the last time she got married – a simple white lace dress, a quick marriage after getting pregnant with Jonathan, trying not to wait too long before she started showing. This, this parade of dresses, each of them beautiful even if they're not quite right, feels *extravagant* in a way Joyce never has never been able to experience before.

Joyce has heard stories before, from other women, about shopping for wedding dresses and just *knowing* when they try on The One. It's always sounded silly to Joyce when she's heard it in the past, a romanticized version of spending all day trying on dress after dress and the exhausted relief of finding one that looks good.

But then.

Joyce finds The One.

Oh, I understand.

Off the shoulder, tulle cap sleeves, embroidered curved v-neckline, delicate lace over sleek satin, hugging her waist and hips before falling down her thighs, hem hitting her mid-calf....

It's perfect.

Joyce feels *beautiful*.

"Wow," El breathes from behind. "This is the one."

"You think?" Joyce asks, turning to look at El.

El nods. "I know."

"It's very beautiful," the saleswoman says. "Like it was made for you."

It's a line, a *sales pitch*, but it feels true. And Joyce smiles.

"I'll take it."

El blinks and suddenly, it's July.

Or, at least, that's what it feels like.

Nancy and Jonathan graduate from Hawkins High with the Party gathering to celebrate. Joyce is teary eyed at the knowledge that her oldest is soon heading off to college, practically an adult, but Hop manages to console her while he congratulates Jonathan. El likes watching Hop and Jonathan interact, especially after Hop proposed to Joyce. It does something warm to her heart that El can't entirely place the cause of, but she figures it's because she's just so happy the

two families, the Hoppers and the Byers, get along *so well*.

Summer vacation starts and it's glorious. El loves school, she loves learning and classes, but there's something about hanging out with her friends all day that makes her feel warm in the best way possible.

But the best part about summer? The part that makes El want it to last forever?

Hours spent with Mike doing absolutely nothing besides being together.

Like right now, right this moment.

The basement of the Wheeler house is quiet, shaded by the blinds drawn down over high windows. It's hot outside, but the house is built into the side of a low hill and the coolness of the earth seeps into the basement, balancing the heat from the July afternoon sun.

The only light in the room is the thin streams of light that bleed through and around the blinds. There's a TV in the middle of the basement, but it's long since been turned off.

As far as El is concerned, there's nothing in the entire universe but her and Mike in the fort he built for her all those years ago. It's bigger now – *they're* bigger now, and, so, the fort has grown to accommodate. It's still a mess of blankets and pillows, shielded from the outside world by sheets stretched over various hard surfaces, a cocoon made for only the two of them.

Technically, they're not supposed to be in the basement alone.

But Mr. Wheeler is out of town on a business trip, Nancy is somewhere with Jonathan and Steve (really, if they could all just admit that they all three love each other, that would be great, thanks), and Mrs. Wheeler and Holly are at a birthday party for one of Holly's friends from preschool. So there's no one there to tell Mike or El they shouldn't be down in the basement alone.

It's not like they're even doing anything, though.

El comes over in the morning when Mike calls for her, using their

connection to reach out (something he's getting better at doing). They eat breakfast together before heading down to the basement to watch a movie, snuggled in the fort, her back against his front, his arm curled around her, hand resting on her stomach.

They make it 45 minutes into the movie before Mike falls asleep.

He's been tired a lot, lately, as another growth spurt pulls and stretches him, body growing new bone and muscle. And the hunger – god, the *hunger* – like there's not enough food to satisfy the bottomless pit that's taken the place of his stomach. El knows it's normal, but still...she worries.

So, when she notices that Mike's fallen asleep, El uses her powers to stop the movie and turn off the TV before she turns in his embrace and curls up against him.

She spends the rest of the morning and the early minutes of the afternoon dozing, his hand on her back, her hand on his chest, and it's perfect.

Eventually, El wakes, unable to doze anymore, and is left with nothing to do but stare at Mike. *Oh no, how ever will she survive?*

Mike's face is relaxed with sleep, giving El gratuitous license to stare at him. She traces, first with her eyes then with her fingers, the constellation of freckles that brush his skin; the lines of his jaw that he's recently needed to start shaving; the high and delicate sweep of his cheekbones; the fullness of his lips; the slope of his nose. She brushes aside the hair that's fallen across his forehead, extending the gesture to let her fingers comb through his hair, fingertips brushing against the shell of his ear.

It's this last that makes him twitch a bit, but he doesn't stir beyond that, and El's heart wants to explode with all the love she feels for him. She wants to be with him like this always. And, probably because Hop and Joyce are getting married in just over a month, El can't stop thinking about what it'll be like to marry Mike someday. It's not an *if*, but a *when* – any other possibility is just unimaginable.

El tries to picture it, tries to imagine what it'll be like. Him in a suit,

her in a beautiful white dress, surrounded by family and friends, happy, in love. It's fuzzy, the details, but El knows it'll be *amazing*, no matter what form it takes.

Mike lets out a groan, then, interrupting El's musing, and her hand goes to Mike's face, palm against his cheek, as his expression contorts from sleepy into agony. He lets out another groan, this one accompanied by a hissed breath, sucked in through his teeth.

"Mike?" El says softly, concerned. "It's ok, I'm here." A nightmare, she thinks.

"El?" Mike says with a tense sigh, his brow pulling down over furrowed brows.

"Yeah, it's me," El says. "Bad dream?"

Mike shakes his head, pained expression not fading. "My legs. Hurt."

"Where?" El asks. So, not a nightmare. Literal growing pains. Mike's told her in the past about waking up in the middle of the night, legs stretched and burning, muscle feeling like it's going to break and tensing to hold itself together.

"Lower," he says. El doesn't even ask if he wants her to help. Mike's in pain, so helping him is a foregone conclusion.

Gently extracting herself from under his arm, El scoots down to the other end of the fort, near Mike's feet. Carefully so as not to cause him any more pain, she grabs one of his ankles and shifts his leg so she can sit between his ankles. With the other leg stretched out beside her, El keeps hold of Mike's ankle and slides her hands up to his calf, fingers gently rubbing the muscle there. Luckily, he's wearing shorts, so his lower legs are bare, giving El easy access to his skin.

Mike lets out a tight sigh and El looks up to see his face, eyes squeezed shut. He's drawing in deep breaths and, for a moment, El almost stops. "No, keep going," he says. "It's nice. Good."

Mike's skin is soft beneath her touch as she digs her fingers into the muscle just so, hair that's just beginning to coarsen beneath her

fingers. She massages up his calf, lingers at his knee – fingers circling with just the right amount of pressure on either side of his kneecap – before pressing down the length of his shin bone, muscle tight on either side of the bone. She ends at his ankle, rubbing gently into the tendons there, before setting his leg down and then grabbing the other to repeat the process.

By the time she's finished and is scooting back up to lay next to him, Mike's face is more relaxed, skin not nearly as pinched. "Better?" she says, curling into his side, head on his shoulder.

"Yeah," he sighs. "Better." Mike turns, limbs shifting and twisting, so he's facing her, lips pulled up in a humorless grin. "Sorry about that."

El shrugs and feels her heart skip a beat at how close his face is to hers. *Every time*.... "Nothing to be sorry for," she says. "Just glad I could help."

The look Mike gives her is fathomless, full of so much emotion, and El's breath catches at the sight of it. He reaches out to tuck her hair behind her ear, fingers playing with the locks of her hair. "God, I love you," he says, more whispered than spoken, a rush of air in the shape of words. Sleep still clings to the edges of his features – lids just a bit heavy, eyes slightly bleary. "What did I do to deserve you?" he murmurs, gaze flitting across her face, lingering on her lips in a way that makes El's stomach feel light and swooping.

El inches closer to him. "You were just you," she says. "That's all it took." Her hand comes up to curl around his jaw, fingertips lightly touching his cheek. "Just you."

Mike's response is to lean in and kiss her, lips light against hers, soft and sleepy. Warmth explodes in a flurry of butterflies, making El feel all light and tingly, like she could just float away. She kisses him back, slow and lazy, completely unhurried. They have all the time in the world down here, where it's just the two of them.

His hand slides into her hair, palm cupping the back of her head, while her fingers trail down from his face, down his neck, until she presses her palm to his shirt, right above his heart. He groans, the sound vibrating against her lips, pulling an answering whimper from

her throat.

Their kisses are long and heavy, but soft, so soft, like they're drinking from gossamer glass, all gentle tugging of lips and whispered caresses. The hand in her hair slowly, *slowly*, trails down her back, over the light, loose-knit sweater she wears, before sneaking beneath it. His palm is warm, *hot*, against the small of her back, through the thin cotton of her camisole.

For a while, this is enough.

But, as always, it never is.

El feels the world tilt beneath her, *literally tilt*, as Mike gently pushes her, rolling her onto her back. El helps, dragging him with her, not even breaking the kiss, fingers curled in his shirt. Her hand slides under his arm to wrap around his torso, her other arm, now freed from her laying on it, joining to hold him close.

Mike's sprawled half on top of her, legs beside hers, their bodies pressed together from shoulder to hip. And it's good, it's *so good*. The weight of him is warm and thrilling, and El loves that it's almost impossible to tell where she ends and he begins. Her chest brushes against his with every deep, gasping breath and she swears she can feel the beating of his heart through their clothes. There's an edge to their kisses now, a heat that wasn't there a few minutes ago, and it makes El feel loose, like she could just wrap herself around him and never let go.

Urgency begins to build in her blood, prickling her skin. Her palms itch, wanting, *needing* to touch him, needing to make him feel the way she's feeling. And, before she's even aware of having the thought, her hands are trailing down Mike's back, fingertips digging into his shirt, pressing hard against him.

Mike moans against her mouth, tongue brushing against her lips, and she parts her lips to let him in. The touch of his tongue to hers is exciting, electricity zipping down her spine, heat pooling heavy beneath her skin. El arches against him, using her hands as leverage to press up against him. *Oh god*, is that good. There's no space between them, now and the friction from their breathing is just...

indescribable.

They're both moaning now, lips parted in open mouthed kisses, trying to devour each other, bruising kiss after bruising kiss. Gone is the slow languidness of a half hour ago. In its place is *passion*, hot and heavy, hearts pounding, blood racing, dizzying and overwhelming.

Instinct takes over and her hands are slipping beneath Mike's shirt before El's even aware of what's happening. His skin is soft to the touch and *so warm*. Her fingers dance against his torso, tracing patterns across his abdomen, and El loves the way the muscles of his stomach jump at her touch.

Mike breaks away from her mouth, sucking in a hissing breath. "Jesus, El..." he breathes. El takes the opportunity to lean up just a bit and press her lips to the spot just under his jaw before she gives the skin there a nip with her teeth. And, all the while, her hands are moving, palms gliding against his torso, up and *up* and-

Mike's shirt is off in a heartbeat, a flurry of limbs and giggles. And then their eyes meet and El almost can't breathe. Mike's looking down at her like she's the answer to every question he's ever had, eyes wide, pupils blown, skin flushed. She leans up to kiss him, needing to feel his lips on hers again, like she'll cease to exist if he's not kissing her. His discarded t-shirt slips from her grip, forgotten, lying uselessly next to her as her hands go to his ribcage.

His skin's hot to the touch and, as she glides her palms around to his back to pull him closer, his groan echoing around her, through her, she feels the heat of him bleed through her sweater and *he's not close enough*.

But then Mike drags his lips from hers and begins kissing his way down her neck and El loses the ability to think. She tips her head back against the pillow, arching her back to give Mike better access. His hand slips higher up her back as his lips land on the spot where her neck meets her shoulder. El lets out a gasp, mouth falling open, as he latches on *right there*, lips and tongue caressing the skin of her neck.

Her sweater, pulled up by Mike's hand under her back, bunches

uncomfortably, *frustratingly*, beneath her breasts and El lets out a whimper. *It needs to go.*

El brings on hand around to Mike's chest to push on him slightly, pushing him away just enough to give her space. She's looking at him while she reaches for the hem of her sweater, sees the look on his face explode with concern – "El, I..." – before he notices what she's doing.

Time slows, their gazes locked, unable to look away from each other, as El arches her back and tugs the sweater up. Mike's hand at her back holds her up while she lifts her shoulders, arms stretching above her head as the sweater's pulled free. Her hair tumbles free as she pulls the sweater all the way away, arm stretching out to drop it. And, for a long moment, they can only stare at each other – her in just her camisole and jean shorts which are a few inches too short according to Hop, him without his shirt.

El's gaze flickers down to Mike's chest and her hands follow her gaze, touching him the way she's been wanting to for weeks.

Of course, it doesn't last long before Mike's kissing her again, hand snaking beneath her camisole this time, palm against bare skin. His touch ignites a flurry of shivers across El's skin and she gasps, mouth breaking away from his. He's pressed against her, the heat of him even more overwhelming through the thin fabric of her camisole and El arches against him, needing to be closer.

With his mouth free, Mike kisses his way down her neck once more until he gets to her collarbone, lips dragging across the sweep of them, the hand not up her shirt coming to caress her shoulder. His fingers curl beneath the thin straps of her bra and camisole, pulling them down her shoulder so they lay limp against her upper arm, his mouth continuing across her skin unimpeded.

Yes, please, don't stop.

It's entirely possible that the words escaped from El's parted lips, given the way Mike groans against her skin, hand beneath her shirt creeping higher.

But El's lost, lost in the sensation of the heat of his body against hers, the thrill of his mouth on her skin, of his hand on her back, under her shirt. She feels light, airy, like she's untethered from gravity and-

Mike lifts his mouth from where he's kissing her, the patch of skin just below her collarbone, right above the upper slope of her breast. "Um, El?" His voice is low and raspy in all the ways El likes. But there's something in his voice that cuts through the haze of passion surrounding them.

"Yeah?" she asks.

"Um, don't panic, but-"

"But what?"

"...We're floating."

For a moment, El freezes. She's not panicking, *she's not*. Instead, she takes in a deep breath, turning her head...and looks *down*.

The floor is a good two feet beneath her and, when she looks up at Mike, she notices the ceiling of the fort is pressed up against his back.

"Oh."

Mike lets out a snort, followed closely by a laugh. "'Oh?' Is that all you can say?"

El grins. "Sorry?"

Mike smiles. "Oh, don't be sorry. This is *awesome*. I can make my girlfriend float by touching her and-"

El rolls her eyes and pushes Mike off her with her powers, rolling him off her so that he lands back on the floor of the fort beneath her with a shocked gasp. El keeps herself floating in the air, gently spinning so that she's looking down at him. "That was mean," Mike pouts, propping himself up on his elbows to look up at her. But the look in his eyes is one of awe and love, so El reasons he's not too hurt.

El arches an eyebrow. "Well deserved, you mean."

Mike grins. "Yeah, maybe." He reaches up for her, hand sliding in to her hair, and he leans up to kiss her, faces both hidden by the curtain of her hair. Still floating, El smiles into the kiss. Mike sits up, other hand joining its twin in her hair, and El gently lowers herself, legs curling beneath her, so that she's sitting across his thighs, knees on either side of him.

The kiss ends what feels like forever later and El pulls back to find Mike smiling down at her. "You're unbelievable, you know that?" he says, voice filled with the awe that colors his expression.

"Yeah?" she asks.

Mike chuckles. "I mean, you'd be unbelievable even without superpowers, but..." He shakes his head. "You're so *strong*, so powerful." His eyes narrow, questions racing in his gaze. "Just how powerful are you, anyway?"

If it were anyone else asking, El would think there was an ulterior motive. But, since it's Mike, and she *knows* him, she knows it's just curiosity. So, she smiles. "Want me to show you?"

It's with a combination of reluctance and curiosity that has Mike scrambling out of the fort and holding out a hand to help El to her feet. They grab their discarded clothing and, after a quick lunch - where Mike eats 3 peanut butter sandwiches to El's 1 as she sits perched on the kitchen island, him standing between her knees as they eat, drinking the remaining half of the half-gallon of milk straight from the carton - El grabs his hand and guides him out the front door.

"Where are we going?" Mike asks, squinting against the sun high in the sky, heat bearing down on him. Damn him, and his curiosity.

But El smiles up at him and Mike no longer cares about any of that. "Junkyard," she says. "C'mon."

She shifts her hand in his, pressing her palm against his, fingers weaving together, and then they're off, heading for the forest, for the train tracks. The shade of the trees protects them from the worst of the heat and it's nice, walking with her, quiet with just the two of them. They don't speak – there's no need for words with them, sometimes, and it's something Mike never thought he could love until he met her. He's always talking, always explaining, mouth moving a mile a minute to keep up with his thoughts. But, with her, it's just... not important, not necessary. Yeah, sure, he indulges in a good ramble on a regular basis. But he doesn't feel the need to fill the silence and it's a relief, more than he can describe, really, that he can just be quiet with her.

Later, they emerge from the forest in front of the abandoned junkyard. Déjà vu pulls heavy at Mike, as he remembers the first time he and El made this journey almost three years ago. But, this time, they're not hunting for the Gate or escaping from the Bad Men. It's just him and her and whatever she wants to show him.

"Is anyone here?" El calls out, voice loud. It shocks Mike, the volume of her voice; El's not very loud and very rarely raises her voice to anywhere near a shout.

After a minute when no one responds, El tugs on his hand. "This way, to the clearing."

Mike follows, like it's the only thing he's made to do (follow her, protect her, *be with her*) and he stops when she turns. They're standing near the bus they hid in so long ago, yellowed grass beneath their feet.

"Just watch," she says. And then she closes her eyes, concentrating.

Mike looks down at her, confused. But then the sound of metal groaning has him looking away. The groaning grows in volume, followed soon by the sound of metal scraping. And Mike watches as the whole junkyard – countless cars and abandoned appliances, trash, and even the damn bus – just...*lift off the ground*.

"Whoa," Mike breathes, stepping away from El so he can turn and take it all in. A light frisson of fear rolls down his spine, an

uncontrollable instinct. But, mostly, what Mike feels is *awe*. He kneels on the ground, low enough to look under the junk that's floating just a couple of feet in the air, and his line of sight is clear all the way past the junkyard, all the way around.

Mike stands and looks at El. A trickle of blood escapes her nose, trailing down towards her upper lip. But it's not like she looked after she came home from closing the gate – veins black beneath her skin, blood leaking from her ears. No, she's stronger than that now. “El,” he breathes. “You can stop now.”

Slowly, Mike watches as the junkyard settles back down on the ground to the sound of metal banging and he looks over in time to see El sag, gasping as she lets go of her powers. Mike's in front of her in an instant, hands reaching out to grab her shoulders. “Hey, you ok?”

“Yeah,” she says, voice shaking a bit. “Still working on holding all these pieces up in the air. S’hard.” Her hand snakes down into the pocket of her shorts, emerging moments later with a tissue clasped between her fingers.

“Here, let me,” Mike says, taking the tissue from her. Gently, he wipes away the blood on her face. “El, that was amazing. I-I didn’t know....”

“Didn’t know what?” El asks, looking up at him with wide eyes, curiosity shining in her gaze.

“You’re so strong. And you’ve been practicing, yeah?”

El nods. “Once every other week or so, Hop and I come out here to practice. He says I should, to make sure I can use them when I need to, so I can be better at controlling them.”

Mike pulls her close, wrapping his arms around her, and his heart skips a beat when he feels her nuzzle into his chest, her hands going to his waist to curl into his shirt. “You don’t need superpowers to be awesome,” he says. “But, I’m not gonna lie...that was pretty cool.” He’s grinning like an idiot, he just knows it. Nerdy Michael Wheeler, dating a real life superhero. And she *loves* him.

El pulls back just enough to look up at him. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” he says. “I mean, it was a little scary. But, cool. Really cool.” He leans down to kiss her. “My hero.”

El giggles. “You’re a goober.”

“And, yet, somehow you still love me.”

El smiles, brighter and warmer than the sun. “I do. I really do.”

Summer goes by in what feels like a rush of hot days and Party hangouts. It’s like, before Will knows what’s happening, it’s the week before the wedding, a week before his mom will officially be married to Jim Hopper...a week before El will officially be his sister.

Will’s mostly been watching the wedding planning from the edges, tangentially curious about flowers and cake and decorations. But there’s been a lot of other things going on: Jonathan getting ready to move out for college, Will and his mom continuing to move their whole lives into the Hopper household, bouncing from Party member’s house to Party member’s house as they all hang out and have fun and laugh like there’s not a care in the world.

It’s been both easy and difficult, the transition that’s taking over Will’s life. It becomes more and more real *every day* that Jonathan’s moving away, that Will’ll only see him during holidays and school breaks. And moving out of his house has been...just a complicated swirl of emotions.

He likes his new room, across the hall from El’s. The window gives a good view of the front yard – great for sketching – and it’s a million times nicer than his old room, with freshly painted walls and new carpet; not dark wood paneling and carpet worn from years of being trampled underfoot. He sleeps better now, too. It’s silly, really – it’s not like he still suffers like he did after he came back from the Upside Down, or after the Mind Flayer. But knowing El is just across the hall,

all valkyrian with protective fury and supernatural powers, relaxes the vice that occasionally grips at Will's heart and makes it hard to breathe. His hero, his *savior*, is just a second away and it's a relief beyond all imagining.

But, at the same time, he longs for *home*. Hop's house isn't home yet, doesn't carry the years of memories, of hopes and dreams, of fears and tears. Will knows this'll pass as time goes on, but still. It's not easy.

It's the week before the wedding, a Friday late afternoon. Hop's finishing up a shift at the station and Joyce is working late. It's just Will and El at home (*yes, home*. He'll get used to it eventually), and they're watching TV in the family room, when suddenly, a thought occurs to him.

"Hey, El?" he says, panicking a bit.

"Yeah?" Will hears El turn towards him.

"What should we get Mom and Hop for a wedding present?" he asks, turning to look at her.

El's eyes go wide as the question sinks into her brain and it'd be funny if it also didn't reflect the same panic Will's currently feeling. "Oh, um...."

Their eyes meet. "Shit."

"We have to get them something," El says.

Will sighs, throwing his head back against the couch cushions. "But *what*? We don't have any money."

El chews on her lower lip, gaze flicking down before she looks back at him. "We could make them something. Something like...." She trails off and it's like Will can see the gears turning in her brain as she searches for an answer.

And, moments later, Will knows El has it as she looks at him, eyes wide, lips stretching in a grin. "A scrap book," she says, breathing the words. "You can get some pictures from Jonathan and we can make

the pages and decorate them. We'll need to figure out a way to make a cover, but we can totally do that."

The excitement in El's voice is palpable and Will feels himself getting swept up in the idea, her excitement contagious. "That's a great idea, El. C'mon, let's go grab pictures from Jonathan. He'll give them to us if he knows they're for Mom and Hop."

An hour and a trip back to Will's old house later, and Will and El are sitting in her room, pictures spread out of her bed. The déjà vu hits him, Will remembering the last time they sat on her bed, sifting through pictures, when she wanted help decorating her bedroom the year before.

Only, this time, they're looking for pictures of Hop and Joyce, with the occasional family photo thrown in for good measure. It's quiet work, the silence comfortable. There's the occasional comment, a laugh here and there, but Will and El are mostly content to work in silence. The understanding between them runs deeper than words and it's nice, nice knowing that there's someone in Will's life that he doesn't have to *perform* for.

A giggle bursts out from between El's lips and Will looks up at her. "What is it?" he asks.

"Look," she says, holding out a picture for him to see. Will takes a look at it and laughs. It's Hop and his mom, sticking their tongues out at each other, clearly in the middle of teasing each other. Their eyes are crinkled at the corners, smiling despite everything, and it warms Will's heart that his mom's with someone who loves her enough to be so *silly*. It reminds him of Mike and El, who tease and make fun of each other, who aren't always so serious, even if they sometimes are so very serious with how much they love each other.

Some of Will's thoughts must reflect on his face because El tilts her head in question. "Whatcha thinking?" she asks, smile sweet and curious.

"You and Mike are so going to get married someday," Will says. It wasn't what he was thinking, exactly...but it's not a far leap from where his thoughts were.

El giggles. “God, I hope so.”

Will levels a look at El. “No, you are. I know it.”

El hums, almost a sigh. “What made you think about that?” she asks.

Will shrugs. “Oh, you know,” he starts. “Was thinking about how Mom and Hop remind me of you and Mike sometimes and, well... take it from there.”

“Being married someday will be nice,” El says, blushing lightly at the thought. She looks at him, critically. “What about you? Do you want to be married someday?”

The question crystalizes in Will’s brain, a punch to the gut. Because, *god*, does he want to get married someday. But, more importantly, he wants to *be able* to get married someday. And, well.... Will looks down, suddenly uncomfortable, panic prickling at his skin, palms going clammy. “I do,” he says, gulping. He can tell her, she won’t look at him any different, she loves him, it’ll be fine.... “But I’m not sure if I can.”

Will looks up to see El looking back at him, eyebrows pulled low over her eyes, concern etched on the lines of her face. “What do you mean? Why wouldn’t you be able to get married?”

The sudden shift in Will’s mood leaves him dizzy – happy just moments ago, now scared – and he looks away. But El reaches out and lays a hand on his arm and Will feels tears gather in the corners of his eyes. “Will, what is it?”

He hadn’t planned this, hadn’t intended to tell her *right now*. But her hand is warm, bleeding comfort into where she’s touching him, and Will takes it, folds it around his heart, and gathers the courage. “I like boys.”

Will watches El’s face and the confusion that’s still there is almost painful. “What do you mean?”

“Like you like boys, like you like Mike,” Will continues. “I’m gay, El.”

El knows the word – Will knows she does, knows she’s heard it, and

worse, lobbed at him – but he doesn't know if she knows what it *means*. "Like you want to kiss other boys?"

Will blushes and gulps. "Yeah, like that. That's why I don't know if I can get married. Because boys aren't allowed to marry other boys. " He looks away to gather strength before looking back at her. "Don't tell the others, please. I'm...not ready for them to know."

El smiles. "I won't, I promise." She squeezes his arm, shifting closer to him on the bed. "It's ok, you know."

Will feels the tears gather strength behind his eyelids, in his throat. "What's ok?"

"That you like boys." She grins, conspiratorial, like she's gossiping. "Boys are pretty great."

Will lets out a laugh that almost sounds like a sob. "Yeah, they are."

Then El's hugging him, holding him close, arms tight around him. "I love you, Will."

Will's lower lip trembles as he hugs her back. God, he loves her hugs, loves how safe she makes him feel. And she knows, she *knows* his secret and she loves him anyway. How did he get so lucky? "Love you, too, El."

"You'll get married someday, even if we have to keep it secret." El sounds so *sure* that Will almost believes it.

"Need to find a boyfriend, first," he says, sniffing a bit.

"We can do that, too," El says. "I promise, you'll find someone, Will."

Will pulls back just enough so he can look El in the eye. "Yeah?"

The intensity in her gaze blows him away and he's grateful, so very grateful, that he has her on his side, that he's gaining her as a sister. "I'll make sure of it," she says, smiling so wide her cheeks must hurt. "You deserve to be happy, Will. No matter what that means. And I'll do whatever it takes to help you be happy. You'd do the same for me."

It's true, Will can't deny it. He would do *anything* for El. Just as he knows she'd do anything for him. It's how it works between them, a bond so strong nothing can break it. "I'm lucky to have you as a sister, El," he says, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand.

"Well, I'm lucky to have you as a brother, so we're even." She smiles. "Now, let's get back to work. We only have a week to get this done."

Will rolls his eyes, relief sweeping through him. "Ok, slave driver."

El smacks him on the arm. "Don't be mean to your older sister."

Will grins. "By only a week!" he fires back. El knows his secret and she loves him anyway and now they're having fun and teasing each other and it's such a *relief* and he's so *excited*.

God, this is going to be so fun.

He can't *wait*.

Notes for the Chapter:

Yay, call back to a previous chapter! I've been planning on circling back on the flashforward with Will coming out to El. Hopefully, it works!

Next chapter: the Wedding!! *confetti*

21. Aug 9, 1986

Notes for the Chapter:

Um, holy crap? I finished this in two days? What?

Seriously, get ready for the SCHMOOPIEST thing I've ever written. I'm warning you, seriously.

Aug 9, 1986

Saturday, August 9th, 1986 dawns bright and early, sun piercing the horizon and rising into a sky filled with thin, wispy clouds.

El only knows this because she's awake, unable to sleep due to sheer excitement. The air is cool, but not unbearable, as she sits on the porch swing of the Byers' home, using her powers to give the swing a gentle push every now and then.

Inside, Joyce and Max are asleep – a last minute, pre-wedding slumber party, of sorts – and El takes comfort in the quiet, the moment alone. It's such a contrast to the giddiness that swims in her veins, making her feel happy and light. Because, after today, Hop and Joyce are going to be *married* and El's family will be fully united and it's going to be fantastic and perfect.

But, that's all hours away. The ceremony's at 2pm, and Nancy and Karen won't even be over to help everyone get ready until 11am. So, there's time yet, time to let her thoughts wander.

Smiling, El closes her eyes, thinking of Mike. He's over at her house, spending the night with Will. He'll be getting dressed for the wedding over there, since Karen and Nancy are coming over much earlier to help Joyce, El, and Max, and Mr. Wheeler is out of town again on a business trip. El knows this has caused a lot of tension between Mike's parents and being over at his house has been weird and unsettling in a way that El's been trying to avoid if at all possible.

But, that's not what's important right now. What *is* important is that it's been *hours* since she last saw Mike. *Unacceptable*.

So, with her eyes closed, El slips into the Void. It's like pulling on her favorite sweatshirt or slipping under the covers of a warm blanket, transitioning into the Void – easy, comforting.

Mike's there when she opens her eyes and El smiles as her eyes alight on him.

That is, until she notices he's sleeping in her bed. El pouts – no fair, him sleeping in her bed without her in it, too. She's not too mad, though. With Will in his room and Jonathan probably in the guest room, there was probably nowhere else for Mike to sleep except either the couch or her room. And, given that El wasn't *in* her room last night, well...it makes sense.

El's smile reasserts itself as she walks over to her own bed, silhouetted by the weak white-blue light of the Void, and very gently crawls onto the mattress. Mike is lying diagonally across her bed, one arm thrown above his head, the other resting on his stomach, just where the blanket is drawn up to. Kneeling next to him, El takes a moment to just stare at him, all cute and sleepy and so very pretty, despite (or maybe because of) the way his hair is mussed by sleep, crazy mop of black locks like a halo around his head.

Slowly, so as not to disturb him, El shifts so that she's straddling his stomach, making sure to keep her weight off of him, before she leans over him and *pulls*.

Mike pulls in a deep breath at the shift into the Void, but remains mostly asleep. El grins. *Can't have that, now*. She brings a hand to his face, palm cupping his cheek, and leans over him the rest of the way, other arm propping her up. "Mike, wake up," she says, quiet, giddy.

Mike lets out a sleepy murmur. "Go 'way. Sleeping." His brows are drawn together, forehead wrinkling.

El giggles. Right. Time to pull out the big guns. Leaning down, El presses a soft kiss just under the corner of his right eye. Mike lets out a soft sigh, but doesn't stir beyond that.

So El keeps going, trailing feather light kisses across his cheek, down to his jaw. And when she circles around to the corner of his mouth,

she hears the sharp intake of breath, the gasp of wakefulness. “El?” he says, voice sleepy even through the question.

El lifts her head so she can look down at him, look down into his now open eyes, gaze soft and dreamy. She smiles so wide it feels like her face is going to break. “Morning,” she says before she kisses him, his lips pliant beneath hers.

He’s still half-asleep when he kisses her back, but the hand that’s on his stomach comes up to curl around her hip, his touch warm through the thin t-shirt she’s wearing.

The kiss is long, lazy, completely unhurried. And, when it ends, El giggles, feeling like her insides are full of bubbles.

“You’re here,” Mike says, smiling. He’s waking up, but it’s a slow process. Which is ok – El loves sleepy Mike, all soft and warm, loose smiles and dreamy touches.

El runs her fingers down in an arc from his temple to his jaw, a light caress that has him sighing. “Kind of here,” she says. “In the Void. I’m still at Joyce’s old house.”

“Mmm, good enough,” Mike says, sighing softly. “Like waking up to you.”

The admission is probably one he wouldn’t have uttered if he’d been fully awake (another reason El loves sleepy Mike) and it makes her heart skip what feels like several beats. “Yeah?” She’s blushing now, blushing and smiling and feeling all warm and gooey.

“So pretty.” Mike pulls his other hand down from over his head, reaching up to curl a lock of hair around his finger, thumb playing with the end. “Wonderful.” He lets go of the curl, hand shifting so he can slide it into her hair; his fingertips against her scalp create a cascade of delicious shivers that resonate down her spine. “Amazing.” He pulls her down, leaning up a bit at the same time. “Perfect.” Then he’s kissing her, pulling her down with him as he settles back on the pillows, and El’s heart feels like it’s going to burst in her chest.

For a few, long minutes, there’s only the two of them trading soft,

deep kisses, surrounded by the nothingness of the Void. Eventually, though, the kisses come to an end and El pulls back, biting her lip. Mike's looking up at her, smiling, eyes sparkling. God, she loves him.

"Well," she says, building off his previous, superbly romantic words. "You aren't so bad, yourself, I guess."

More awake now, Mike lets out a dramatic gasp, hands leaving her to clasp over his heart. "I'm wounded, *mortally wounded*. I pour my heart out to you and *this* is what I get in return?"

El giggles, grinning. "Take it or leave it, Wheeler."

A look of amused determination crosses over Mike's face. "Oh, that's it. You're getting it, now, Hopper."

El's on her back before she can blink and Mike's nimble fingers are dancing up and down her sides a moment later. El lets out a shriek of laughter. "No, don't! Stop!" she manages to get out through her laughter, twisting and squirming beneath Mike's fingers.

"Don't stop? Ok." El can hear the grin in Mike's voice, but she's too busy laughing and giggling and trying to get away.

It feels like forever, but is probably only a minute, before Mike eventually stops tickling her. El's face feels hot from laughing so hard, but it doesn't matter much as Mike is lying next to her, one arm draped across her stomach, the other propping up his head. She smiles up at him, feeling still a little out of breath. "Hi," she says, voice breathy.

Mike grins. "Hi." He leans down and kisses the tip of her nose. "This is nice."

"You tickling me? Agree to disagree."

Mike lets out a quiet chuckle. "No – well, *I* thought that was fun – I meant just being with you, nowhere to be, no one bugging us, no pressure or anything."

El lifts a hand up to Mike's face, her fingers running over his cheek, thumb right below his lips. "Yeah, this is nice," she agrees.

There's a *moment* when they freeze, just looking at each other, drinking in the sight of the other, before Mike leans over and kisses her. El sighs against his mouth, her fingers still on his cheek, her heart feeling oh so full.

Mike's mouth leaves hers and El lets out a breathy moan as he trails his lips along her jaw, down her neck. He huffs a laugh against her skin and El finds herself smiling. "What's so funny?" she asks, absently shocked at how breathy and husky her voice sounds.

"I wonder..." Mike nips at her throat and El whimpers. "If I give you a hickey here in the Void, will it show up for real?"

El lets out a giggle and shrugs, her shoulders shifting against Mike's body, heart pounding in her chest, warmth spreading through her limbs. "Won't know unless you try."

Spoiler alert: it doesn't (and not for lack of trying).

Karen and Nancy show up a little before 11 in the morning, armed with makeup and curling irons and everything else needed to make 5 women look beautiful.

And it's good timing, too, because it's really, *really* beginning to feel real in the best way possible.

Joyce's stomach has been taken over by an army of fluttering butterflies and it feels like she could just melt, she's so happy. In a handful of hours, Jim Hopper will be her *husband* and it's all just so wonderful.

Karen immediately takes charge, directing El to get in the shower, before she starts sorting through all her supplies. From there, it's a flurry of makeup applications and hair styling, laughter and teasing and smiling. At some point, Nancy turns on the radio to some Top 40 station and Joyce laughs as Nancy, El, and Max dance in the living room, all three teenagers laughing and spinning around.

At shortly before 1, Jonathan shows up, wearing a new suit. Everyone's dressed and Karen and Nancy are just putting the finishing touches on both El and Max before they help Joyce.

"Wow, you guys all look fantastic," Jonathan says, gesturing with his camera at where everyone is in the living room, all dressed to the nines. But then he looks over at Joyce and Joyce can see her son just soften, his smile turning gentle. He comes over to where she's sitting in the kitchen and Joyce stands. Her hair's halfway done and makeup still needs to be applied, but it's clear that none of that registers with Jonathan.

Jonathan leans down to hug her and Joyce is glad her makeup isn't done yet because she's tearing up. "You look beautiful, mom."

"Not even finished, yet," Joyce says, sniffing a bit.

"Well, then, you'll be stunning when it's all done," Jonathan says, kissing her on the cheek.

Joyce looks up at him, her darling son, the only partner she's had for so long, the only other person she could count on, and her heart feels like it's going to burst. "Thank you," she says, the words meaning more than Joyce can possibly convey. *Thank you for being my son, for being there for me, for helping me, for giving up so much, for being so supportive. Thank you for **everything**.*

Jonathan sniffs a bit, his eyes glassy with tears. But he just laughs and shakes his head a bit. "Alright, I'm armed with more rolls of film than any one person should have in their possession. Let's get this started."

Karen finishes up Joyce's hair and makeup while the rest of the girls hover nearby. Jonathan stands just at the periphery, snapping picture after picture, occasionally joining in on the laughter and conversation.

At quarter past 1, Karen declares herself finished and guides Joyce down the hall to her old bedroom, to where her full length mirror still stands. "What do you think?" Karen asks, standing behind Joyce with her hands on Joyce's shoulders.

For a moment, Joyce is speechless. It's just *perfect*. Her face is made up in a way that makes her look elegant, her hair is half pulled up in a loose chignon, the rest of it gently curled and flowing down her shoulders. With her gorgeous dress and strappy white heels, Joyce feels *beautiful*.

"Karen, it's amazing," Joyce says, turning to look at her friend. "*Thank you.*"

"You deserve it, Joyce," Karen says, smiling even though her own eyes are shining with tears. "You really do."

Karen guides Joyce back out to the living room and turns to Jonathan. "Jonathan, why don't you call over at Jim's house and have Will come over. You guys probably will want some pictures with the whole family before the ceremony."

Jonathan smiles. "Yeah, that's a good idea, Mrs. Wheeler. Mom, what do you think?"

Joyce smiles, sighing. "Call him over."

Jim forgets how much he hates cufflinks until he has to attempt to put them in through those damn tiny holes. After what feels like minutes of grumbling, Jim's almost considering cancelling the entire wedding because *goddamn cufflinks who invented these fucking things I find the person who did I'll kick their ass so hard their grandkids will be feeling it*.

But, eventually, he gets the second cufflink threaded and huffs out a breath. *There, done*. Finished getting dressed – the cufflinks were the last step – Jim steps over to take a quick look at himself in the mirror. He smiles at his reflection. New black suit, hair neatly combed, boutonniere pinned to his lapel – not too shabby. He looks like a man who's about to get married. Which, conveniently, is exactly what he is.

Grinning, Jim leaves his room and heads down stairs. The boys plus Steve are all lounging around the living room, all of them dressed for the wedding. No one's arrived yet, but when guests do start showing up, the plan is for all the boys to act as ushers.

"Hey, looking good, Boss," Steve says.

Jim grins. "Not so bad yourself, Harrington." He looks over at the other boys, making sure everything's in order, and rolls his eyes. "Henderson, Wheeler, get your asses over here."

Dustin and Mike give each other panicked looks. "What'd we do?" Mike asks, whispered.

"I don't know, he's your future father-in-law."

"Shh, shut up, Dustin!"

Jim has to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing as Dustin and Mike head over, getting up from where they're sitting on the couch.

Dustin gets there first, just ahead of Mike, and Jim reaches out to grab the kid by the shoulders. "Hold still," Jim says before his hands go to Dustin's tie, straightening out the knot before flattening and smoothing down the lapels of Dustin's jacket, which had somehow folded in on itself. "Ok, you're good. Mike, your turn."

Dustin moves aside and Mike takes his place. Jim sighs at the knot of his tie; it's a mess and Jim's reaching out to undo it before Mike can even say anything. "Jesus, who taught you to tie a tie?"

"My dad tried, but..." Mike shrugs.

Jim cringes and he sighs, sympathetic. "Sorry, kid." He pulls the tie from Mike's collar and loops it around his own neck, tying it quickly before pulling the loop over his head and setting back around Mike's neck. It takes a few moments of fidgeting – getting the tie under the collar, folding it down, tightening the knot, centering it – but it's done pretty quick. Jim looks almost straight across into Mike's face and shakes his head. "Growth spurt finished?"

Mike smiles, the expression a little bashful, and shrugs. "I think so? Haven't grown any in a couple of weeks."

"What are you, 6'1"?"

Mike's smile turns into a grin. "6'2", actually."

Jim rolls his eyes good-naturedly. "You gotta stop this growing-up shit, Wheeler. Keep going and El'll come up to your elbow."

"She's pretty tiny," Mike says with a laugh.

"Just don't tell her that," Jim says. "She *hates* it." It's true; his daughter's topping out at just under 5'6" and she's pretty petite compared to both her father and her boyfriend. ("I'm getting tired at looking up at you both all the time." – "Have you ever thought maybe we're getting tired at looking down at you, short stuff?" – "Ugh, *Dad*, don't call me short!")

The phone rings and the sound makes Jim jump just a bit before he turns to go answer it. "Yeah?" he uses as a greeting.

"Uh, hey," Jonathan's voice comes through the line. "Can you send Will over? We need him for some pictures."

"Yeah, sure. I'll send 'im right over." Jim hangs up without saying goodbye and turns back to the living room. "Hey, Will. Head back over to your old house. Your mom needs you for some pictures."

"Can I go, too?" Mike asks as Will heads towards the front door. There's an eagerness on Mike's face – no doubt wanting to see El – and Jim would normally let him go, thinking it stupidly adorable the entire time.

But, this time, Jim shakes his head. "Not a chance, Wheeler. People are going to start arriving soon and *you* need to be here to help."

Mike actually pouts, like someone kicked his puppy, and Jim wants to laugh. "Ok, fine," he grumbles.

"I'll be back!" Will calls out before he's out the front door.

There's a moment of silence before Jim sighs. "Well, we might as well get out there, make sure everything's good before people arrive. C'mon, people, let's go!"

And, as everyone else scrambles out the patio door in the living room, Jim smiles. Because he's getting married today to Joyce Byers and everything's perfect.

Will practically *skips* as he walks from his new house to his old house (it's weird, suddenly having two houses. Like, what?).

Excitement bubbles up inside of him, making him feel effervescent. How's it possible to feel so happy? Will feels like it shouldn't be possible to feel this sky-high – like, any moment, someone's going to come up to him and pop the balloon that's keeping him afloat.

But, no, the happiness feels like it's here to stay. And even though Will knows life isn't easy – *god, does he know that* – this feels like the start of something new, something *permanent*. Or, more accurately, making official what's been permanent for a while. Because, for a while now, Hop and El have been an integral part of his life.

With Hop, it stretches back to doctor's appointments and trips to Hawkins Lab, Hop always making sure to be there for him and his mom. And, since Hop started dating his mom, it's been even better. There are moments when Will feels like Hop's his real dad – quiet breakfasts with Hop asking Will about the upcoming school day, questions about whatever Will's drawing followed by a smile and a ruffle of his hair, the solid, silent support after a nightmare when Will's in the kitchen trying to avoid going back to bed and Hop finds him and the two just sit and Hop just lets Will calm his own breathing, waiting until he settle down before taking him by the shoulder and guiding him back to bed.

And El...there are no words to describe just how much Will loves her. She's so much more than his sister – a kindred spirit, the mirror of his soul. There's an understanding between them that goes beyond

words, beyond meaning and Will knows that, no matter what happens in life, El will always be there, will always be a part of his life, a part of him.

And now Hop and El *both* are going to be family, officially.

Will's so *excited*.

It's this excitement that carries him along the road between houses and, less than 10 minutes later, he's at his old front door. "I'm here!" he calls out as he walks through the front door.

Will spots Max and El, first, sitting on the couch. He smiles, awed by them. The two girls look very, very pretty – Max in a short-sleeved teal dress, her hair pulled back in a French braid, and El in a sleeveless dark pink dress. "Wow, you guys look beautiful," Will says. "Lucas and Mike are going to freak out."

Max blushes and stands to come over and hug him. "Thanks, Will. You don't look so bad, yourself."

Will hugs her back. He likes the fiery Max Mayfield, but he also likes it when she can show the soft, sweet girl inside.

"Yeah, you look great, too, Will," El says.

"Thanks," Will says. "Hey, where's my mom?"

"In here, sweetie!" Joyce calls out, from the kitchen.

Smiling, Will follows the sound of her voice, looking into the kitchen-

-And freezes, jaw dropping. His mom looks *beautiful*, shining with happiness, like a queen or a princess or something. It's not that Will hasn't thought that his mom was pretty before, because she is. But this...dressed in white, looking radiant and happy and so light, like nothing bring her down – it's nothing that Will ever imagined for his mom and he's so happy, indescribably happy, that his mom has this chance to be happy and loved and cherished.

Will can feel the burn of tears in his eyes as he walks over to her, watching her stand from where she's sitting at the old kitchen table.

Joyce smiles at him, her own eyes shining with tears, and the smile she gives him is a little wobbly. “Don’t you start crying,” she says, laughing a bit. “Because I’ll start crying and ruin my makeup.”

Will laughs and goes to hug her. He feels his mom’s arms wrap around him, tight. He’s taller than her, now, and it’s weird how she can make him still feel like he’s a little kid, but he loves it, loves the feeling of safety and comfort that fills him when he hugs her.

Will pulls back a little and looks at his mom. “You look so beautiful, Mom,” he says, softly. He’s dimly aware of the snap-click-whir of Jonathan’s camera, but it’s the furthest thing from important right now.

Joyce smiles and sniffs a bit, holding back tears. “Thank you, sweetie.” She turns to look at Mrs. Wheeler, who’s standing just off to the side, smiling widely. “Karen, would you mind taking the camera from Jonathan for a bit? I want a picture with both of my boys.”

Mrs. Wheeler giggles. “I’d love to, Joyce.”

And, as Will stands there with his mom and Jonathan, him and Jonathan on either side with his mom in the middle, Will thinks, prays, *hopes* it’ll always be like this – together, loved, *happy*.

Always.

People start showing up at the Hopper household, guests filing in a few at a time. Mike’s surprised to realize that he recognizes most of the people who are showing up as he, along with Dustin and Lucas, help show people to their seats – friends of his mom, who were friends with both Mrs. Byers and his mom in high school, almost all of Hawkins’ police force, a couple of people who work at Melvald’s or other places downtown. It’s a small town, so Mike really shouldn’t be surprised. And yet....

Mike has to admit, though, as he shows people to their seats, that the

backyard of the Hopper household looks amazing. Everyone had pitched in last night – and Mike means everyone, the whole Party, Steve, Jonathan, and Nancy – setting up chairs and tables and a dance floor, stringing fairy lights around canopies, weaving flowers through trellised archways, marking the pathway from the front of the house around to the back with white fabric runners. He's never been to a wedding before, but Mike likes to imagine that they all look like this, even if he would rather be caught dead than admit that out loud.

(like admitting that he likes waking up to el's face earlier that morning, sleepy and cocooned by the void, the warmth of her surrounding him as she lay on top of him. it would have been even more embarrassing if she hadn't smiled so prettily. he smiles as he thinks about the long minutes that followed, the long stretches of kissing and necking and he wonders if the several hickeys he gave her are visible for real. god he hopes so.)

The time inches closer to 2pm and there's a flurry of motion off to the other side of the house. Mike looks over and sees a small crowd coming from the direction of Will's old house. He sees Will and Jonathan, and his mom, but the rest are obscured as they race into house through the patio door, getting ready for the start of the ceremony. Mike thinks he sees a few flashes of color – blue-green, light purple, pink – but he can't pick out El from behind the bodies. He can *feel* her though, and she's close.

You guys almost ready to start? He reaches out to her, with the connection that is as much a part of him as a leg or an arm. He doesn't even have to think to feel her. It's like breathing – automatic and essential.

Almost. Tell the others? El's voice in his head always sets off a complicated swirl of emotions, all of them good, a combination of happiness and warmth and excitement. And the brush of her mental presence is *everything*.

Will do. Love you.

Love you, too.

Smiling, Mike goes over to Lucas and Dustin. "Hey, I think we're

starting soon. We should go let everyone else know.”

There’s a flurry of whispers as they let everyone else know and, minutes later, Mike’s in his seat near the back, turned around to watch the proceedings. His mom, Nancy, and Max show up first, rushing to sit down, all of them dressed up and looking pretty.

Mike glances up at the space where the altar’s been set up. Hop’s standing there next to the officiant, looking way more calm than Mike thinks he would be if he were getting married, hands clasped in front of him.

Off to the side, out of the corner of Mike’s eye, Jonathan starts the music on the sound system he rigged up last night, and Mike turns back to look in the direction of the house, knowing it’s all about to start. His heart is pounding in his chest and he’s not entirely sure why.

But, when he sees El, he knows why.

And Mike Wheeler promptly forgets how to breathe.

She’s on Will’s arm as he guides her down the aisle, a small bouquet of pale pink and orange roses in her free hand. The dress she’s wearing is *magical*, just...the most beautiful thing Mike’s seen in his life. From the deep pink color to the neckline and lace that show off her shoulders and collarbones, to the rhinestones that make her sparkle, the fabric of the skirt that floats around her thighs...it’s *amazing*.

And her hair, god *her hair*. A sparkling comb pulls it away from the right side of her face, leaving a cascade of gorgeous curls to fall down her shoulders and back, the tips of them brushing below her shoulder blades. She’s wearing makeup, too, but it’s elegant and soft, enhancing her natural beauty.

And then El sees him and she smiles and Mike’s completely blown away. She’s *ethereal*, completely and really unreal. Like she’s been plucked from some deep corner of his imagination, a wish he never even knew he made come to life.

Mike's eyes follow her as she and Will walk down the aisle. He's unable to look away, unable to even process anything other than her. El's magnetic, irresistible, and just otherworldly, and Mike knows that there's no one else for him in the whole of time and space.

The wedding goes by in a blur for him, though he remembers enough to look back to watch Joyce walk down the aisle like everyone else does. He spends the whole rest of the wedding watching El, who's standing next to Hop. She's smiling, ecstatic, glowing with how happy she is, looking so beautiful it makes Mike want to cry.

And, as Joyce and Hop exchange vows, it hits Mike.

Someday, it's going to be him and El up there, exchanging the same vows, making the same promises, til death do they part, forever and ever.

Mike's short of breath, his heart pounding in his chest. He can see it, with such sudden clarity: El walking down the aisle, looking radiant; them standing at an altar, her hands in his; slipping rings on each other's fingers; and happy, so happy. And he wants it *so bad* he can taste it.

Mike wants to be with El forever – knows he *will*. He's going to be with her for the rest of his life. El's it for him, his One Person, the woman he's going to marry someday.

God, he can't wait.

(later, much later, when he gets home from the wedding long after the sun has set, remnants of champagne still floating through his veins, he moves around his bedroom, gathering all the money he has scattered and tucked away in various corners and containers. he doesn't think about it too deeply as he does so, like it's just something he's doing as an afterthought. 20 minutes later, he counts up the various bills and coins: 30 dollars and 41 cents. not a lot...but it's a start.

so mike takes all the money he's gathered and places it in a small metal tin he once used to hold little green army men before sealing it up and burying it deep in his closet, to keep it safe from prying eyes. because mike wheeler is going to marry el hopper someday and, well...

he needs to buy a ring first.)

The ceremony's beautiful, but Jim only has eyes for Joyce. From the moment he spots her coming down the aisle, his whole world narrows down to her and only her, looking radiant and shining and just wow, everything else becoming a blur in the background.

But Jim manages not to trip over his own tongue while he says his vows and then he's kissing her and it's just perfect, like he never thought he'd get to have again.

From the ceremony, it's a seamless transition into the reception and Karen takes charge, rounding up the kids to help move chairs and set up for dinner.

Because it's Jim and Joyce, dinner's a casual affair, despite how nice everything looks. Buffet style, everyone free to grab what and how much they want. Tables are arranged in a loose circle around the makeshift dance floor and people talk and eat, there are speeches and toasts, and so much alcohol – wine, beer, champagne. It's a goddamn party and one that feels so well deserved.

But everything hushes when Jim and Joyce have their first dance as husband and wife. They're dancing and talking quietly as he leads her across the dance floor and Joyce is giggling and he's smiling and it's amazing. And Joyce is so beautiful, he feels like the luckiest guy in the world. She looks up at him with those shining eyes and giddy smile and Jim just wants to give her the world, he loves her so much.

Their dance ends to a round of applause and then the dance floor's open. Joyce and Jim sit off to one side, her snuggled up against his side, his arm around her, as they watch the kids take over the space, having fun and dancing.

"They look like they're having a good time," Joyce says, her tone fond and soft.

Jim sighs. "They do," he says before his gaze lands on El. She and Mike are dancing hand in hand as "Sweet Home Alabama" plays, El laughing and giggling as Mike twirls her. He spins her out before pulling her back the way she came, her hair and skirt fanning around her as she tips her head back and giggles, looking so very happy as she lands against Mike's chest. Mike's all smiles and they don't even care they're in public, apparently, as they lean in to kiss each other, like no one else is even there, even though they're surrounded by their friends.

Joyce lets out a giggle and Jim looks down. "What's so funny?"

"It'll be their turn to have one of these soon enough," she says, looking where Jim was just looking, at Mike and El.

"What, a wedding?" Jim asks.

"Yeah, you ready for that?"

Jim sighs and lets out a laugh. "Figured out it was going to happen a while ago. Just hoping they'll take their time."

Joyce lets out a sound that is part snort, part scoff. "You'll be lucky if they wait until they're out of college."

Jim groans, but it's mostly good-natured. "Let me dream, Joyce. Can I please have that?"

Joyce sighs, all put upon, though Jim knows it's an act. "I suppose," she says and Jim looks down to see her smiling up at him.

Jim smiles back, feeling like he must look like the love-sick fool he feels like he is. "I love you," he says, the air around them turning from teasing to serious.

Joyce smiles softly, love reflected in her gaze. "I love you, too." And then she's kissing him and Jim lets the whole world fade away.

Hey, he's allowed.

It's his wedding day.

The realization that Mike's going to marry El someday makes the rest of the evening just...*magical* is the only word to describe it.

He comes up to her at the end of the ceremony, once everyone is milling around and before his mom rounds them all up to help set and clean up, and El spots him as he's making his approach, smiling as she sees him.

"Hi," she says, all light and happy and with a giggle on her breath.

Mike responds by kissing her, bending to capture her lips, a task aided by the heels she's wearing. El sighs against his mouth and Mike lifts a hand to cup the back of her neck, her curls tickling the backs of his fingers. His thumb rubs small circles just under her ear and he feels her shiver against him, goosebumps breaking out along her skin.

El breaks the kiss and looks up at him, eyes wide, smile playing on her lips, cheeks flush with happiness. "Hi there."

Mike smiles back, feeling like his heart's going to burst from this chest. *This is the woman I'm going to marry someday.* "Hi." He feels like an idiot – the happiest idiot, but an idiot nonetheless – with the way he's smiling.

El smooths a hand across his chest, over the lapel of his suit jacket. "You look nice," she says. "I like the suit."

Mike lets out a laugh. "Thanks," he says. "Not as nice as you, though. You look gorgeous."

El bites her lip even though she's smiling and Mike has to resist the urge to kiss her so she'll let go. "Yeah?"

"You are the most beautiful sight I've ever seen," Mike says, unable to hold the words back. It's the 100% truth, though, and *friends tell the truth.*

El giggles and blushes even deeper, which just makes her look even

more beautiful. "C'mere," she whispers slyly, fingers wrapping around his tie, as she stands on her tiptoes and pulls him down for a kiss.

Mike kisses her without hesitation and feels her mouth open beneath his, lips soft and inviting. God, he just never wants to stop kissing her. He could do this for the rest of his life and die a happy man.

"Hey, you two, quit sucking face and come help us!" Steve's voice slices through the air that surrounds them, cutting the moment short, and El rolls her eyes as she pulls away, Mike laughing at the exasperated look on her face.

They join the others to help and, before Mike knows it, everyone's laughing and eating and having a great time. Dustin sneaks a few bottles of champagne up to El's room for later and the whole Party is buoyant with the thrill of the secret.

Eventually, the music begins and the dancing starts and, after Joyce and Hop share their first dance, the dance floor is open to everyone and anyone. El immediately drags the whole Party to go dance and Mike finds he doesn't mind dancing to even the fast songs as long as she's in his arms. They dance and spin and kiss, all the while laughing and smiling and it's the best night of Mike's life, even better than the Snow Ball, because *he knows now*, he knows he's going to spend the rest of his life with El and the thought makes him feel like he's going to float away, he's so happy.

Mike's so lost in El that it takes him a moment to realize that the bouquet toss is about to start as El's pushing him towards the edge of the dance floor.

"Go wait over there," she says, giggling.

Mike smiles, arching an eyebrow at her. "No cheating, ok? Don't use your powers to pull it towards you."

El rolls her eyes before leaning to press a quick kiss to his lips. "I won't, I promise." And then she spins away in a cloud of curls and tulle, joining the other women and girls who are now standing in the middle of the dance floor.

Mike goes to the edge of the dance floor, hands in his pockets, and turns to watch. A few feet away are the rest of the Party, sans Max, Nancy, and El who are standing together, laughing.

Off to his other side, Mike notices Hop coming up to stand next to him and he turns to look at the older man. “Hey Hop. Um, congratulations, by the way. It was a nice ceremony.”

Hop smiles, looking more at peace than Mike can remember ever seeing him. “Thanks, kid.” A companionable silence stretches between the two of them as they both turn their attention to the gaggle on the dance floor.

Joyce is all smiles and laughter as she turns her back to the crowd of women and tosses her bouquet over her head.

There’s a long, breathless moment as Mike watches the bouquet sail overhead, a moment Mike will always associate as a point in time with a specific and very well defined *before* and *after*.

Because the bouquet lands very neatly in El’s hands (completely by chance, if the look on her face is anything to go by).

And, very suddenly, Mike feels *everyone’s* eyes on him. Off to one side, the Party is dying of laughter, pointing and jeering at Mike through whoops of laughter.

But it’s Hop’s gaze that Mike feels most keenly, eyes burning into the side of his head.

He’s not ready to die yet, but Mike knows there’s no point in delaying the inevitable.

So, with a gulp, Mike turns to look at Hop, the man who Mike was thinking would become his future father-in-law, but who Mike is now thinking might be his murderer.

When Mike looks at Hop’s face, the older man is looking back at him with both eyebrows pushing up towards his hairline and Mike feels the words just start to fall out of his mouth. “Hop – sir – I didn’t – I mean, I told her not – it was totally luck, I swear – I...”

Hop reaches out and lays a hand on Mike's shoulder, effectively cutting off Mike's word vomit. "Kid, breathe. I was watching. Just...." Hop breaths in deeply, giving Mike's shoulder a squeeze. "Do me a favor and give me a heads up before you ask her, ok? Not to ask for permission, just...just so I know."

All Mike can do is nod, feeling faint and almost dizzy. Hop just nods, gives Mike a small smile, and walks away, leaving Mike standing there feeling like up is down and the sky is green and the earth is flat.

Did...did Hop just give Mike his blessing?

For real?

Huh.

Holding onto the bouquet Joyce just threw, and still blushing from all the congratulatory teasing from the other women (and especially Max and Nancy), El makes her way over to where a still shocked Mike is standing. She glances over at where Hop is standing, chatting with a few of the officers from the station, before finally approaching Mike.

"Hey," she says, smiling gently. "You ok?"

Mike looks down at her, eying the bouquet she's holding like it might turn into a snake and bite him, before he looks her in the eye and smiles. "Uh, yeah." His voice cracks, pitching high, and Mike blushes, coughing to clear his throat. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"Hop giving you a hard time?"

Mike relaxes a bit and breathes out a laugh. "No, surprisingly. It's just...." He shakes his head and gives a wave of his hand. "Not important right now."

"So, when's the big day?"

El looks over to see Dustin grinning at her, eyebrows waggling. "Shut

it, Dustin,” Mike says, but it lacks true heat.

“Yeah, you just try and tell us you’re *not* thinking about it,” Lucas says, coming up next to Dustin along with Will.

“Guys,” El chastises. “Please?”

Dustin smiles. “Well, because you asked so nicely....” He chuckles. “Hey, we were thinking, how about we head to Castle Byers after the cake? Bring the you-know-what I stashed up in El’s room and just hang out?”

El looks up at Mike as he grins and nods. “Sounds good.”

The Party hangs out on the periphery of the reception, staying and watching while Hop and Joyce cut the cake, waiting to leave until after they have some themselves. It’s not hard to slip away, though El lets Hop know where they’re going so he doesn’t worry.

Dustin somehow manages to grab even more champagne, bringing their total haul to 5 bottles, and El’s both a little scared and very excited to try the drink.

But, once they’re in Castle Byers and El’s used her powers to uncork the bottles and she takes the first sip – bubbles hitting her tongue, light and effervescent – she lets go of the fear. They curl up together, drink warm champagne straight from the bottles, and laugh like they’re the only 6 people in the world.

The alcohol goes straight to their heads – because of course it does, it’s their first time drinking – but none of them care, they’re all laughing too much.

El ends up curled on Mike’s lap, his hand wrapped around the curve of her ribcage, palm hot through the fabric of her dress. She feels floaty and light, like gravity’s stopped working. Mike’s laughing about something, but she’s not paying too much attention as she’s just enjoying the his warmth, the way his voice rumbles against the side of her head as he talks and laughs, the lean length of his torso against hers.

Eventually, Dustin and Lucas get into a tipsy spat about something

(something about who can do something better than the other? El's not sure) and they leave Castle Byers to settle it, Max and Will hot on their heels to moderate. But El has no desire to get up, not when she's feeling so comfortable.

Then it's just her and Mike in Castle Byers, her in a beautiful dress with her shoes tossed in the corner, him in his shirt sleeve and slacks, jacket and tie in the same corner as her shoes, both of them warm and tipsy and so in love.

El lifts her head to look up at him, smiling at the amused smile on her face, and she reaches up to tap his nose with her index finger. "We're all alone," she says, smile turning into a grin.

Mike's smile grows even wider and his other hand, which is sitting on her knee, comes up to slide into her hair, causing a shiver to ripple across her skin. "So we are," he says before he tips her face up and kisses her.

El moans against Mike's mouth, lips parting, tasting the champagne on his tongue. She chases that taste, kissing him deeper, mouth slanting harder against his. The hand on her ribcage slides down to her hip, around to the small of her back, and Mike kisses her as hard as she kisses him, lips hard and bruising.

Mike drags his mouth from her a few moments later, lips gliding along her skin and up her jaw to the skin just under her ear. El lets out a loud gasp at the feel of his mouth teasing the sensitive flesh and her hands curl into the fabric of his shirt where they rest on either side of his ribcage. "God, I love how you taste," Mike says against her skin, teeth scraping against her neck.

El lets out a whimper that she would have normally been embarrassed at if what Mike was doing didn't feel *so good*.

He kisses her again and the world spins so deliciously, his mouth on hers setting fire to her veins. She wants...she's not sure what, just that she does *so bad*.

It's *him*. She just wants him and the thought rings through her mind like a clarion bell, sharp and overwhelming. El breaks the kiss with a

gasp, looking up at Mike. His eyes are dark, flush high on his cheeks, lips swollen and glistening. He's looking at her like he wants to devour her whole and El's tempted to let him. She wonders, absently, how she looks to him, if any of what she's feeling is reflected on her face – the want and love and overwhelming need.

El wants *everything* with him and she thinks about the bouquet she caught, like it's a promise of everything. "I'm glad I caught the bouquet," she whispers, voice low and sultry from the champagne and Mike's kisses.

It's not what Mike's expecting, El can tell, from the way he chuckles, head shaking a bit. "Why are you glad?"

El smiles and links her hands behind Mike's neck, playing with the hair at the nape of his neck. "Because I'm going to marry you someday, Mike Wheeler. And we're going to have *everything*."

Mike smiles, the sweetness of the expression cutting through the darkness in his eyes. "Yes, we are."

El tips her face up, nudging Mike until he starts to lean down. "Promise?"

"Promise."

And then he's kissing her, the promise of everything sweet on his lips, full of love and hope, and El lets it consume her, hoping it always, *always*, feels just like this.

Notes for the Chapter:

So, if you want to know what El's dress looks like, the link to a picture is [here](#).

Also, massive shout out to my darling EvieSmallwood for, well, literally letting me yell at her on Tumblr *all day*.

(seriously bby, couldn't do this without you. thank you for putting up with me!)

If anyone else wants the pleasure of me flailing in their direction about Mileven, hit me up @fatechica (yes, i'm surprisingly consistent with my usernames)

22. Aug - Nov 1986

Notes for the Chapter:

Right, so, fair warning: this chapter is long. Like, really long. Like, 21.5K words long. (omg)

I could have split it up. But I didn't. Because there's a theme, here, and really this chapter is something of a couplet/triplet. And I couldn't figure out the best way to split it and I was agonizing over it to death, so I just decided to put it up in one go.

If these get too long, please just tell me and I'll do better to rein in my verbosity.

Also, this is not fluff. There's some fluff, but...you'll see.

Finally, I'm dedicating this to the ineffable EvieSmallwood for, again, supporting me by letting me rant at her and give her way too detailed play-by-plays as I'm writing and just talking to death about these characters well into the wee hours of the morning (the yelling and flailing should go need to go unsaid by this point, but I figured another mention never hurts). If I could gift chapters, this one would be for you, hon.

Aug - Nov 1986

Things in Hawkins settle back down to normal after the Hopper-Byers wedding...at least, for a little while.

Joyce and Will fully move into the Hopper household and there's a week of scrambling as Jonathan and Nancy prepare to go off to college. They already have an apartment lined up in New York City (partly furnished, even) to help save on housing and it's just a matter of finding the last minute things they need, like pans and bathmats and whatnot.

The plan is for Jonathan and Nancy to road trip up to New York on their own three days before orientation. At first, Karen's not on board with the idea – she has always envisioned the family going with Nancy to drop her off for college. But, Nancy wins out after pointing out that staying in New York is expensive and there won't be a lot of room in her new apartment and both her and Jonathan are going to be really busy getting unpacked and going to their respective orientation.

So, a week after Hop and Joyce get married, Jonathan and Nancy are packed up in Jonathan's car, which is filled to the brim with all of their stuff, as they exchange teary hugs with everyone, making promises to call when they get to New York and get settled. Then they're gone, taillights fading in the distance.

And now everyone's left trying to figure out how to fill the holes left by their absence. A weird mood comes over everyone – especially Joyce and the Wheeler family – and El finds herself affected by the shift.

It's during this time, the last dying weeks of summer vacation, everyone preparing for sophomore year of high school, that El starts reflecting on family – on the concept in general, on the families she knows...on her own families, past and present and possible.

El's family history is a patchwork quilt of could-have-beens and misery. Torn from a mother who never got to love her, raised by a man who only wanted to use her, connected to siblings who were just as damaged – El knows how lucky she is, how fortunate she is to have come out the other side surrounded by love and safety.

She wonders sometimes, though, about those could-have-beens, the what-ifs.

What if she hadn't been taken from Terry Ives? What if she'd been raised by her birth mother? Who would she be? Would she still be "El"? El wonders what it would have been like to be Jane Ives, wonders who that would have been. She wonders if Jane Ives would have ever met Michael Wheeler, wonders if Jane Ives would have ever fallen in love with a boy with freckles like the night sky and a heart big enough to swallow the world whole.

El likes to think she would have met Mike no matter what name she was raised with. But if the price of ensuring, of *guaranteeing*, that she gets to have Mike in her life is her first 12 years of wretched existence, then it is a price worth paying. Because she would rather pay the price a thousand times and be sure than take the chance of never having him in her life at all.

But Terry Ives is not the only road not taken.

El thinks a lot about what life would be like if she stayed with Kali. She'd been prepared to do just that, to stay, to fight. It would have been so easy – *lost, unwanted. Mike with another girl, happy. Hop free from worry, unable to be hurt by her. With people who understood her pain, who could feed the anger deep inside, give her that release.*

And she'd been *so certain* that staying away was the right thing to do, that she had found where she belonged, where she should belong, that everyone she loved was better off without her, that she could only cause them pain and misery.

But all it took was one look at Hop and Mike in the Void during a moment of weakness, the two of them looking so worried and scared, frantic, *in danger*, to bring El to the heart-pounding realization that, no, she couldn't stay away. That even if Mike had moved on and Hop would be happier without her, she still cared, still wanted them safe, still wanted to be there with them.

In the end, El's glad she didn't stay with Kali, that she made the choice to run towards the people she loves rather than away. And it's been *so good* since she came back – becoming Hop's daughter, gaining a real family made up of the people she cares about most, growing up with Mike, falling more and more in love with him with every day that passes.

But thinking of Kali makes El think of other things.

Brenner. What he did to both of them – taking them from their families, experimenting on them, *hurting them*. Kali using her powers to make El see him, playing games with her head.

Brenner, who's dead, who can't hurt anyone anymore.

Brenner, who Kali doesn't know is dead.

She deserves to know.

But how to tell her?

El checks in on Kali through the Void on a regular basis. Because after everything that's happened, even after how El left her, even if El doesn't agree with how Kali lives her life, there's still a connection between the two. Kali is still El's sister. And that means *something*.

But Kali's in Arizona and that's a problem. Because, one, there's no way El's going to be able to get out to Arizona – it was amazing she had been able to get out to Chicago and back with the money she had been able to scrounge up – and, two, she doesn't want to approach Kali alone.

The answer to how to get to Kali comes to her quick: the Void. El's ability to use the Void, to reach others, only grows stronger every day. She knows she can pull Kali in if she tries hard enough.

And the answer to not going alone?

It's a quiet Friday two weeks after the wedding, two weeks before the start of the school year. Joyce has a mid-morning shift at Melvald's and El asks if she can get a ride to Mike's house.

"Call me if you need a ride home, sweetie," Joyce says as she pulls up in front of the Wheeler household at 9:30 in the morning.

El smiles, hand on the door handle. "I will. Thanks, Joyce. Have a good day at work." She leans over to give Joyce a kiss on the cheek before she opens the door and is out on the Wheeler front lawn, the August morning air warm on her skin.

Joyce drives off and El makes her way up the walkway that runs alongside the front of the Wheeler house. She rings the doorbell and waits what feels like only 10 seconds for the door to open.

Karen greets El with a smile that's a little too bright and brittle on the edges. It's been like this since Nancy left, like Karen's trying to fill in the empty spaces through sheer will alone and it's just not enough. It makes El uneasy to watch, like she's staring at a plate that's teetering on the edge of a tall drop and is too far away to catch it in time before it shatters. "El, hi! I didn't know you were coming over. Michael never said anything about it."

"He doesn't know," El says. "I came over to ask him to help me with something."

The smile on Karen's face softens and El feels her unease fade a little. "Well, he's still sleeping," Karen says as she steps aside to let El in. "You're welcome to go try and wake him up. Lord knows it's like trying to wake a hibernating bear. Did you want to stay for breakfast?"

El smiles. Even though she ate an hour ago, there's no way she's turning down a meal cooked by Karen Wheeler. "Yes, that sounds fantastic, Mrs. Wheeler. Thank you for asking."

Karen gives El a fondly exasperated smile. "You can call me Karen, El. I think you've earned that by now."

"I'll try," El says.

Karen lets out a small laugh. "I suppose that's all I can ask for. Well, I'll just be in the kitchen. Breakfast will be ready in a little bit. Try and see if you can get my son up in time for it, will you?"

And, with that, Karen is gone, a cloud of perfume and hairspray in her wake, and El's standing alone in the entryway.

El toes off her shoes at the base of the stairs, setting them aside so no one can trip on them, and ascends the carpeted staircase, sock covered feet quiet against the soft surface. The house is cool compared to the air outside, and El feels a little too underdressed her short jean shorts and sleeveless blouse. But, El reasons, she can always grab one of Mike's many, *many* sweaters to help keep her warm.

The thought brings a smile to her face as she reaches the top of the stairs, fingers brushing lightly against the banister.

El knows where Mike's room is, could probably navigate her way up to it with her eyes closed by now, and she quietly opens the door, closing it after she slips inside.

For a moment, El rests against the door and just *looks*.

The room is a little warm, partially due to the fact that the window is open a few inches (probably to let the cool air in overnight, but the temperatures have risen while Mike's been asleep). But the room's also warm because Mike's a human furnace, a fact which El loves taking full advantage of during the winter months, especially since she can never stay warm.

El lets her gaze wander, across the walls and bookshelves plastered with Star Wars and comic book paraphernalia, over the science fair trophies and academic awards, to the handful of framed photos of the Party, of him and her. But, inevitably, her gaze lands on the middle of the room, the reason she's up here in the first place.

Long gone is the bunk bed that El remembers from when she was first in here. In its place is a full sized mattress, as Mike long ago outgrew the twin of the bunk bed. He's lying in the middle of the bed on his stomach, limbs sprawled around him, arms bracketing his head. He's not wearing a shirt, El realizes with a blush, because of the heat, and El can see the waist of the gym shorts he's wearing peeking above the edge of the blanket.

El bites her lip despite the smile on her face and steps towards the bed, quietly, not wanting to wake him. She loves watching Mike sleep and she's not about to turn down an opportunity when it's presented so neatly in front of her.

El slides on to the mattress, carefully to not jostle him too much, and settles so she's leaning on her hip, legs outstretched alongside him, hand propping her up by the pillows.

At first, El just looks at him, taking in the mess of hair around his head, the lines of his neck and shoulders, the smooth skin of his back,

the freckles that create a map of every place she wants to touch. And then she's touching him, fingertips brushing lightly across his shoulder blades, up the sweep of his neck, down his spine. Her fingers run over the ridges of his ribcage, the muscles where his torso begins to narrow into his hips.

Mike lets out a groan every now and then, and a smile plays at the corner of his lips, but, for a while, he doesn't stir beyond that. He's still breathing like he's asleep and even though El knows Karen's making breakfast for them downstairs, El's in no hurry.

El's fingers are trailing down the center of his spine, down to the small of his back, when Mike lets out sudden gasp. He pulls his arms in to prop himself up on his elbows and, for a moment, El's fascinated with the way muscle and bone shift beneath his skin, mind going blank aside from the *ooh, that's nice* her brain utters.

But then El looks over at Mike's face and she freezes, hand going still where it's pressed against his lower back. Because Mike's looking at her in a way that makes her insides twist, his eyes lidded, dark, almost predatory. El finds herself unable to move, mouth going dry, and she just stares back at him. "El," he breathes, voice low and raspy, not questioning her presence at all.

El gulps – why is she so flustered all of the sudden? – but before she can say anything, Mike reaches for her, hand sliding into her hair with ease, body all but lunging for her. He's kissing her before she knows what's happening, mind feeling like it's two steps behind reality.

Mike's mouth on hers is hot, his tongue licking at her lips, begging her to open up to him. El gladly complies and she curls into him, her own hand sliding from the small of his back around and up to his ribcage, skin warm and soft beneath her palm.

Mike groans and then he's guiding her, lowering her until she's lying beneath him, torso flush against hers, one leg hooked over hers through the blanket.

El lets herself get lost in the sensation that courses through her, all heat and dizzying intensity. God, he's so *close*, all warm and solid and

hers. El arches into him, needing to be closer, needing more of him.

The hand in her hair starts sliding down her back, palm hot through the thin fabric of her blouse. His palm smooths down over her waist, her hip, down to her thigh. His lips never leave hers, trading bruising kisses, mouth slanting against hers over and over again. El's breathing hard, every other breath leaving her throat with a moan or a whimper.

Mike's thumb ghosts over the skin just beneath the hem of her shorts, setting off sparks that tingle as they cascade across her skin. El breaks the kiss with a gasp and Mike takes the opportunity to drag his lips down and across her cheek, to her jaw, mouth hot against her neck. At the same time, his hand begins to inch upward, slipping unerringly beneath her blouse, his body rolling over onto her so that his thigh is wedged between her knees.

El has both hands pressed against his ribcage, fingers curling into his skin, nails biting into flesh, as her head tips back against the pillow beneath her. Overwhelming in the best way, is the only way to describe it. She never wants him to stop, wants him to keep going, to keep touching her this way.

It's like Mike can read her mind – *maybe he can* – as his hand slides ever upward, around to her back, fingers pushing beneath the elastic of her bra.

God, she needs to kiss him again.

El nudges Mike with her shoulder and leans up to capture his lips a moment later. Mike moans against her mouth and she echoes it, bodies shifting against each other, tangling further.

It could be seconds, it could be hours, but sometime later, El feels the clasp of her bra give way and she gasps, not realizing at all until this moment that Mike's been fidgeting with it, fingers working at it. But then she can't think anymore as his palm flattens against the skin high on her back and begins sliding around towards her front, pushing aside the now loose fabric of her bra.

Yes, god yes, she thinks as his fingers inch ever closer to her breast,

his skin hot against hers, mouth teasing her like his fingers are. God, she wants this *so much*, so much it hurts. And everything is too hot, blood roiling in her veins, turning her insides to liquid. Heat pools beneath her skin and El just *wants*.

But, when his thumb is just brushing against the underwire of her bra – *close, so close, fuck* – El comes back to herself, remembers where she is, why she's here...*that the door isn't locked*.

It's not like she's doused in ice water, but it's close – sobering, is the word – and El reaches out with her powers to lock the door as she pushes against Mike. She breaks the kiss, lips inches from his. "Mike, stop."

The effect of her words is immediate and Mike freezes against her. He looks down at her, hand still beneath the fabric of her bra. His eyes are still heated, but clearing up, sharpening, confusion etched into the lines of his face. "El?" he asks, like he's just realizing she's there.

El smiles, confused by his confusion. "Morning."

"What are you doing here?" Mike asks, voice raspy despite the confusion. He looks down at where he's pressed against her, at where his hand is under her shirt, and El watches as his eyes widen before he snatches his hand from underneath her bra and out from her shirt. "Oh, shit, I'm sorry." El immediately misses the feel of his hand on her skin and feels like she's probably pouting.

But, still, El giggles. "You didn't know I was here? What do you think's been happening for the last 10 minutes?"

A fierce blush blossoms on Mike's cheeks. "I thought I was dreaming," he all but hisses.

The words make her swoon – *god, he dreams about you like this* – and she's sure she's smiling like a fool. "Not dreaming," she says, reaching up to give him a quick peck.

Mike's smiling, if still a little uncomfortable, as she settles back down. He pushes off of her, stretching out next to her, and drapes his arm across her stomach. "What are you doing here, anyway?" He's

looking at her, happy curiosity warring with the lingering embarrassment.

El lets out a small laugh. "I need your help with something," she says. "But after breakfast. Your mom's cooking downstairs."

"Everything ok?" Mike asks, concern filling his gaze at the thought of her needing help, and El feels her heart fill with warmth, making her feel all gooey inside.

"Mostly," she says. "But nothing bad, I promise. I'll explain after we eat, ok?"

Mike sighs, not happy with the answer, but accepting anyway. "Ok," he grumbles.

"Good." El sits up and brushes one last kiss against his lips. "I'm going to head downstairs, then. Did you need a minute before joining?" El's aware of the teasing grin on her lips and her words have the desired effect as Mike grabs a pillow and buries his face in it.

"Go away," he says, voice muffled, clearly embarrassed, sounding like he wants to crawl into a hole and die.

El laughs and slides off the bed, heading for the door. She's still giggling as she slips into the hallway, only calming when she enters the bathroom and shuts the door behind her. El takes a moment to check her reflection, inspecting the damage from 10 minutes of feverish making out (her blood's still running a bit hot, coursing through her veins, urging her to *go back to him* – she almost gives in).

Her hands slip under her shirt, arms twisting to reach the halves of the clasp to her bra. There's a bit of fumbling before El huffs a sigh and just uses her powers. *So much for trying it the normal way*, she thinks, feeling the elastic band of her bra tighten as if pulled by invisible hands.

El then pulls aside the collar of her blouse, letting out a sigh of relief when she sees that there're no hickeys that need to be hidden. She splashes water on her face, runs her fingers through her hair in a

futile attempt to impose order onto her curls, and then El's opening the door, stepping back into the hallway.

El only manages two steps before a little face peers from around the banister by the stairs. "Ellie!"

El smiles as Holly comes rushing after her, blonde ponytail waving behind her. "Holly Bell!" El calls back, kneeling to catch the 5 year old girl as she launches herself at El. El picks her up, hefting the girl against her hip, and feels Holly's arms wrap around her neck. "You're getting heavy, Holly Bell."

"I'm *growing*," Holly says, enunciating the word carefully. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to see you, of course," El says as she walks down the hallway, down the stairs.

Holly looks at her skeptically. "What about Mikey?"

El reaches up with a hand and tweaks Holly's nose. "I guess him, too."

"Do you have his cooties now?"

It's Holly's way of asking if she and Mike have been kissing and El can't help but laugh. "Sure do, Holly Bell."

Holly heaves a sigh. "I *suppose*, if you *have* to, it's ok if you have his cooties."

El reaches the first floor. "Thank you for that, Miss Holly. Just between you and me, though, his cooties aren't so bad."

Holly scrunches up her nose. "If you say so." Holly squirms a bit in El's grip, which is the signal to put her down. "Can I sit next to you for breakfast?"

"Of course you can," El says.

"Kay!" Then Holly's running off, leaving El shaking her head with bemusement, before El walks into the kitchen where Karen's adding

pancakes to a larger stack on a warming tray.

Karen looks up at El's approach and lets out a wry smile. "Did you manage to wake him up?"

El hopes she's not blushing as she answers. "Managed to get through to him," she says. "He'll be down in a few minutes." El looks around at the plate of bacon, the piles of pancakes, the bowl of cut up fruit. "Did you need any help setting the table?"

Karen smiles and sighs. "Thank you, dear, that would be greatly appreciated. I'm sure you know where everything is?" El nods and gets to work without comment.

By the time El's finished setting the table and Karen's carried the food out, Mike's wandering into the dining room, hair wet from a shower, dressed in jeans and a t-shirt.

Karen arches an eyebrow at her son. "Well, good morning, sleepy head."

"It's still before 10," Mike mumbles, sitting in his usual seat. He's reaching for El, gesturing for her to sit next to him.

But Holly latches onto El's hand and pulls. "No, she's sitting next to me!"

There's a bit of squabbling between the siblings – Karen off to the side, "Really dignified, *Michael*" – before El rearranges things so that she's sitting in between Mike and Holly.

Breakfast is delicious and fun, Holly dominating the conversation as she excitedly tells El all about how she's going to be starting Kindergarten in a week, starting school for the first time, all ready with a new backpack and new clothes and school supplies – her first ever. Mike and El play footsie under the table the entire time with no one the wiser (though Karen might suspect something, given the looks she gives Mike and El every couple of minutes).

El and Mike (after nudging from El) help Karen clean up before Karen shoos them away. Mike leads El into the family room, the two of them sitting down on the couch. "So, what did you want help with?"

El eyes the walls that surround her, uneasiness bubbling back up inside of her once more. She chews on her lower lip, shrinking in on herself, shoulders curling in. "Could we go outside? I just...don't know if I can talk about it here."

Mike's brows draw down over his eyes, concerned, but he just nods. "Yeah, let's head out to Mirkwood."

Mike calls out to his mom that they're headed out and, together, El and Mike head down to the basement and out through the door to the outside, hand in hand. Mike lets out a small sigh, just barely more than a normal exhale.

El looks over, notices the way Mike's shoulders relax, almost not enough to be noticeable, and starts to feel uneasy for a different reason. "Are you ok?"

Mike looks over and smiles, eyes sparkling. "Yeah, I'm fine. What, I can't be happy going on a walk with my girlfriend?"

El smiles, shaking her head. *Must be seeing things...* "You're a goober."

"You still love me, so, really, that's your problem."

They walk in silence for a while, weaving through the woods, dirt and leaves crunching underfoot. Eventually, El spots a fallen log and pulls Mike towards it. "Over here."

They've barely sat when Mike speaks. "Ok, so what is it you need?"

El takes in a deep breath and sighs. "There are somethings I need to explain first." She pauses, collecting herself. "I need to tell you about my sister." Mike's eyes widen and El can see the millions of questions bubbling up inside of him.

But, thankfully, he gives her the chance to explain, explain about Kali, about what happened in Chicago, about Kali's mission, about how Kali might not know about Brenner.

It takes a while for El to get the story out, but after, Mike nods. "You want to tell her he's dead, don't you?"

El bites down on her lip and nods. “I do,” she says. “I can’t get to her in person – she’s in Arizona – but I think I can get through to her in the Void.” El looks up into Mike’s eyes. “Will you come with me? I don’t want to do this alone.”

Mike smiles, his expression soft. “Of course I will. Just tell me what to do.”

El nods. “Just...stay by my side.” She reaches out for Mike’s hand. “Are you ready?”

Mike’s eyes widen. “Wait, you mean *now*?”

El nods. Now that she’s asked Mike, she doesn’t want to wait any longer. “Yes. *Please*. I just...I need to do this.”

Mike licks his lips, a little nervous, but he nods. “Ok, I understand.” He takes her hand. “Whenever you’re ready.”

El breathes deep, feeling the nerves and anxiety bubble deep in her stomach. “Ok.”

It’s hot. Phoenix is *scorching* in August. Irritability crawls over every inch of Kali’s skin, sweat and sticky clothes and *too fucking hot*.

Nothing’s been the same since they lost Dottie.

Kali’s fault, she bears the responsibility.

*(cop around the corner, out of kali’s line of sight, dottie raising her hands, a gunshot, everyone running, but she’s gone, **dottie’s gone**...)*

There’d been a moment, when Kali had hope, hope that the family she’d managed to cobble together could *stay* together-

(it’s all she’s ever wanted, a family that understood, a family who loved her)

It's all been downhill since Jane left.

Kali can still see her, can still picture her *so clearly* – mop of wild curls, wide-eyed innocence wrapped in so much pain, searching like Kali has been for years.

She remembers the realization, Jane's sleeve pulled up, numbers tattooed on her wrist.

Eleven. No – *Jane*.

Kali's lost sister, one of the only people who truly understood what she'd been through. It was like finding a piece of herself she hadn't known she was missing.

And then finding out Jane could find anyone with only a picture? *Well, then...*

Kali had dreamed so big in the hours that followed. Everything she'd ever wanted was in reach, just past her outstretched fingertips.

No more hunting for scraps of answers, no more digging through false leads.

No, with Jane, Kali could truly take the fight to the people who hurt her, to *Brenner*.

But then Jane left, *abandoned* her, for people who could never understand her, who could never help her.

And all of Kali's dreams died. She let herself fly too high and, like Icarus, came crashing back down to earth, bruised and scarred and broken.

It's the wound that won't heal, the scar that won't fade. And it *hurts*.

And now it's a Friday in August.

Kali's asleep – mostly. It's warming up in the makeshift bedroom they've all managed to cobble together in an abandoned office park and it's threatening to drive Kali from her bed for cooler pastures.

But then the world shifts beneath her, like she's going over a long drop, stomach twisting and swooping.

Kali gasps and opens her eyes. She sits up in a rush, jaw dropping.

She's still in her bed, but only darkness surrounds her, darkness for as far as the eye can see.

With trembling fingers – *what kind of illusion is this?* – Kali pushes aside her blankets and stands. She flinches at the water that sucks at the soles of her bare feet.

“Hello, Kali.”

That voice. Soft, light, but much more confident than when Kali heard it last. Kali turns, heart fluttering. Hope and anger war in her chest. “*Jane.*”

She's standing there, looking so *different*, so normal. Long hair, curls half way down her arms. Sleeveless blouse, pale pink. Jean shorts that hit a few inches above mid-thigh. White Chucks, scuffed a bit at the toes. She looks healthy, cheeks flushed and full, a few inches taller than when Kali saw her last, almost a woman now. And she's smiling, lips softly curving, eyes shining – happy.

(kali hates her – envious. why does she get to be happy when kali's so miserable?)

But Jane's not alone. Standing next to Jane is a boy – a *very* tall boy. Dressed in jeans and a white t-shirt, holding himself a little awkwardly, like he's not sure what to do with his limbs, like he hasn't grown into his height yet. Hair, dark, flops into his eyes, a bit wild; freckles dot his face, covering high cheekbones, a strong jaw, full lips.

They're holding hands.

“Jane,” Kali breathes.

Jane shakes her head. “My name is El. Jane's someone I can never be.”

El...*Eleven*. “That’s what *they* called you, Jane,” Kali says. She has so many questions, but *this*, this makes her forget them, anger boiling inside of her.

“No, it’s what I call her.” The boy speaks, cheeks flushing with righteous anger.

“And who are you?” Kali asks. “What do you know?”

“This is Mike,” Jane says. “He saved me when I escaped the lab.” She pulls in a deep breath. “He gave me ‘El’ and I kept it. He knows, Kali. He knows and he understands.”

The words curdle in Kali’s stomach. “What could he possibly understand?” She reaches into herself, for her powers. *She’ll show him.*

But nothing happens and the bottom falls out from Kali’s stomach.

Jane’s shaking her head. “Your powers won’t work here, Kali. This is my world.”

Fear skitters up Kali’s back – *her powers, gone, been there for as long as she can remember, can’t reach them* – but she straightens her spine and sucks in a deep breath, if a bit shaky. “What do you want, Jane.”

Both teens flinch at the name. *Good*. “We should just go, El,” the boy – *Mike* – says, voice hard with anger. “She doesn’t deserve to know.”

Jane looks up at him, eyes beseeching. And Kali watches as the boy melts under Jane’s gaze. “No, she deserves this at least.”

The two teens stare at each other for a long, meaningful moment and Kali can *sense* the connection between them. *This is why she left, why she went back.*

Mike sighs. “Ok, ok.”

Jane smiles up at him – soft, gentle, loving – and looks back at Kali. “Brenner’s dead, Kali.”

No preamble, no warning. It’s a punch to the gut and Kali’s gasping.

“What?”

“Hop – Hopper, police chief, my dad – he killed him. I saw him die.”

“You almost killed him yourself,” Mike says, pride and awe in his voice. “Would have if Hop hadn’t shot him in the head.”

Kali’s head is spinning. *Brenner, dead, head of the snake, cut off...* “Prove it.” The words are out of her mouth before she knows what’s happening. But she means them. *She’s earned this, at least.*

Jane steps forward, Mike’s arm trailing after her as she lets go of his hand. “I can show you,” she says, reaching out for Kali.

Kali takes a step back. “No, I can’t trust you here.” There’s the anger, the *hurt – she left, took all your dreams with you, left you broken with no way to put the pieces back together.*

“Ithaca.”

Both Jane and Kali look at Mike. “Excuse me?” Kali asks.

“Ithaca. In New York. It’s where Brenner took El when he kidnapped her, where Hop killed him. There’s a facility there that the government used to use, the Department of Energy. His body might still be there.” Mike shrugs. “Take it or leave it.”

Kali files away the information. “It’ll have to do,” she says, voice tight.

Jane sighs, shaking her head. “I’m sorry.”

Kali narrows her eyes. “What for?” she asks, suspicious.

“For leaving, for not staying, for abandoning you.”

Kali doesn’t miss the way Mike flinches at the words. But Jane’s little boyfriend is not her concern. “Could you have been happy with us, Jane?”

Jane’s shoulders slump and Kali has her answer. “I’m sorry,” she repeats. “I hope you find happiness, Kali. You know where to find me

if you need me.”

There’s a *push*, a rush of blood in Kali’s ears. And then Kali opens her eyes and sees the ceiling of the office-park-turned-bedroom, grey-white faded tiles above her. Gone is the endless black – and Jane along with it.

And she cries.

Mike opens his eyes, back in Mirkwood. He’s still holding El’s hands, their grip a little sweaty in the heat and humidity, but still comforting, still a little thrilling.

He looks at El’s face to see her crying, tears carving tracks down her cheeks. His heart immediately lurches into his chest. “Hey, no, no,” he breathes, letting go of El’s hands so he can pull her into his lap. El lets out a sob and buries her face in his t-shirt, her arms wrapping tight around him.

He doesn’t ask what’s wrong, not yet. He will, because El deserves to voice her own reasons, but Mike can hazard a guess as to why El’s crying. Because, despite everything, El cares about Kali, cares about her sister – and Kali doesn’t seem to care back *at all*.

He thinks about Kali, about this woman who’d gone through the same things El has...and come out completely different. Angry, hurt, looking to inflict pain...and still so sad underneath it all.

After a few minutes, El’s tears slow, her breathing calming. “You wanna talk about it?” Mike asks, letting El snuggle her head under his, his chin propped up on the crown of her hair.

“I just wanted her to be happy,” El says.

Mike sighs. “I know you did,” he says. “But you can’t save everyone, El.”

El nods against him and pulls back. “I know.” She looks up at him.

“Thank you.”

Mike leans down to kiss her, her lips soft against his, remnants of her tears salty against his tongue. “Any time,” he says a moment later. He smiles. “Hey, wanna head downtown and get some milkshakes? Maybe throw in a couple orders of fries if you ask nicely enough.”

El giggles. “Don’t have to ask nicely. You’ll just do it for me anyway.”

Mike rolls his eyes. “Ok, fine, I see how this relationship goes. Guess I know how much you respect me.”

El lets out a laugh and pulls him down for a kiss, this one deeper, one that makes his heart flutter and skip several beats in his chest. She pulls back slowly, smiling, and though tears still cling to her eyelashes, her eyes are shining with happiness. “I love you.”

Mike’s breath catches in his throat. *God, every time...* He smiles. “I love you, too.”

And it’s perfect. *Everything* is perfect.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that the Wheeler family is as perfect as can be, an example to make Hawkins proud.

Ted Wheeler, father, company man, model provider, faithful husband.

Karen Wheeler, loving mother, doting wife, beautiful, the very picture of domestic happiness.

Between them, 3 children – 2 girls, 1 boy, the eldest accomplished, the middle brilliant, the youngest charming.

Everybody knows about the Wheeler family and their picture-perfect nuclear family image: large house, beautifully coifed family photos, perfectly happy.

Too bad it's a lie.

The start of the school year approaches and brings with it a rush of activity – back to school shopping, learning new class schedules, wrapping up last minute summer homework. And then school's back in session and it's back to the grind of classes, homework, and tests.

August becomes September, which rolls right into October. Summer turns to fall, the nights get colder, and time marches on.

And yet, Karen feels stuck.

It starts like a sickness, stomach sour, mouth chalky. For a while, after Nancy leaves for college, that's what Karen thinks it is – just a mother missing her daughter who's left the nest for the great wilderness of adulthood, all anxiety and worry. Just the normal course of motherhood. She'll adjust, find a new normal, learn not to worry so much and be happy that Nancy is all grown up, that Karen's job is over when it comes to her oldest.

But it gets worse.

Nancy's departure feels like a turning point for Karen and Ted...and not a turning point for the better. They go from barely speaking to not speaking *at all*.

Ted spends all his time at the office or on the road for work – “Senior management needs me, Karen. This is good for *us*.”

Karen sees Ted during breakfast, almost never for dinner, and only sometimes in bed. He's either working late or out of town on business. It's like living with a ghost, an occasional stranger, someone she used to know, someone she's coming to think she's *never* known.

Ted presses a kiss to her cheek every morning before he goes to work when he's in town, gives her a small, perfunctory smile, sometimes a squeeze of her shoulder. They don't laugh anymore, they don't *talk* anymore. And it's been Karen doesn't know how long since they last

had sex (never as good as it looks in the movies, as it sounds in her novels, but at least it was something and now it's *nothing*).

Karen feels like she's living in a sham of a marriage. On the outside, Ted and Karen Wheeler are the perfect couple, an image Karen has carefully cultivated and maintained throughout the years. But, on the inside, it's just dead. Ted doesn't need her and Karen doesn't know what to do about that.

*(failed, you've failed. bad wife, couldn't keep your husband interested. what will the neighbors say? nothing you can do about it though. what would you even do, karen? get a **divorce**? do you really want that shame staining your family? better to take a lover on the side for what you need. but don't let anyone know, for god's sake. you don't want to be a homewrecker, now do you? a **whore**?)*

She still has her two youngest children, though, still has people who need her.

Or does she?

Holly's in Kindergarten and loving it, getting older, getting more and more independent every day. She comes home from school and is immediately off doing her own thing, only needing her mother to make dinner and help her get dressed for bed. Headstrong and precocious, Holly pulls away from Karen, establishing herself as separate entity from her mother with an ease that leaves Karen spinning. For all that Holly needs Karen for, it seems, the job could just as easily be done by a robot.

And Mike? He's barely home. He has a whole life that doesn't involve Karen. Best friends who are closer than siblings, a girlfriend who Karen knows he's going to marry someday, an entire support structure that's been there for all the things he's been through, the things Karen missed out on...the things Mike couldn't, *wouldn't* tell her about.

When did she stop being able to understand her son? Was she ever able to understand him? Karen sees the way Mike looks at her sometimes – flat, derisive, distant – like he's taken her measure and found her not just wanting, but useless, *unnecessary*. Karen

remembers when Mike was younger, when he was her little boy – inquisitive, eager to share, always wanting to show her something he found cool or interesting or pretty, sensitive and sweet.

But Mike grew up, turned into a teenager on his way to becoming a man. And Karen stopped being the person Mike came to with all the things that were going on in his life, stopped being the person who could read him the best, who always knew what he needed and when. Stopped being the person he relied on for *everything*, as he stopped needing a parent, stopped needing to rely on anyone.

But, that's not the case, Karen comes to discover. No, Mike has other people he relies on, people who understand him in all the ways she can't. She sees him with El, who can read him with a look, who loves him and cares for him in all the ways a partner should, who shares his thoughts and dreams, sometimes *literally*. She sees him with his friends, sees the easy rapport, the deep bonds of understanding and support and shared experiences.

Worst, Karen sees him with Hopper, sees the way Mike smiles at him, bright and searching, seeking approval, comfortable and considerate, conversations full of in-jokes and gentle teasing and camaraderie. As it turns out, it's not that Mike doesn't need a parent. It's just that he doesn't need *her*.

It takes Karen a while to realize all of this, for it all to hit home.

The nausea that creeps inside of her when Nancy leaves soon turns sharp, like sand-paper against her skin, leaving every nerve feeling raw and exposed. She feels like she's cracking down the middle, held together with string and a prayer, her wounds visible for all to see. Her smiles are painted on and sharp, her laughter just a little too bright. She can't sleep and all the wine in the world can't quell the anxiety that bubbles beneath her skin, making her feel too tight, too stretched.

And, still, Karen thinks everything is fine, that it's just separation anxiety, that it'll pass.

It doesn't pass. It just waits, right underneath her skin, insidious, waiting for the right moment to explode.

It's only a matter of time, really.

November 14th, 1986 feels like a day like all the others. Ted presses a kiss to her cheek before he's out the door, suitcase trailing behind him, on his way to a week-long conference for work. Mike eats breakfast in a rush, nose buried in a book for English Lit, his goodbye a rush of murmured words before he's out the door, too, bike speeding off in the distance. Karen drops Holly off at school, her youngest out the door with a distracted 'bye, Mommy!', blonde pigtails trailing behind her without a glance to spare for her mother, who's waving goodbye. Karen spends the next few hours running errands, circling back to pick Holly up at 12:30 before heading home.

Holly runs off to her room, eager to play with her dolls, leaving Karen alone to unpack groceries and other odds and ends she picked up on her errands.

She's just finished throwing away the grocery bags and is stepping back in the kitchen when it hits her out of nowhere. All of it. *All at once.*

She can't do this anymore.

Karen looks around and doesn't recognize where she is. Whose house is this? Whose life has she stepped into? Where did she go? She had dreams once, didn't she? What happened? *What has she become?*

She freezes, hands going cold and clammy, ice spreading through her body from her fingers and toes inward. She gasps as the cold reaches her stomach, slides into her lungs, grips her heart, which is beating too fast, running to keep just ahead of the feelings that are drowning her.

Her breath sticks in her throat, choking her, and Karen feels dizzy. Her knees go weak and the world spins beneath her feet.

She's on the floor, hands braced on the linoleum, perfectly manicured

nails curling against the surface. Her chest is tight, *too tight*, ribcage constricting. She's gasping for breath, wheezing. Tears spill down her cheeks, burn her throat, fill her nose. She can't see, can't breathe... just *can't*.

One hand comes up to claw at her throat, trembling fingers unbuttoning the top few buttons of her blouse, like it'll send air rushing into her lungs straight through her skin if she can just clear the way.

It doesn't help.

Karen's not sure how long she sits there, huddled against the floor. But, eventually, she closes her eyes and *forces* herself to draw in deep breaths. It's not enough, her ribcage is still too tight, lungs not able to expand all the way. But it's enough. Enough to ease the dizziness that makes her head spin. Enough to let her get some semblance of control.

Karen's still crying, tears burning her eyes, as she stands on shaky legs, feeling like a newborn deer. She stumbles into the living room and looks around at the walls that once were warm and homey, but now are suffocating and foreign. And she realizes something, the realization like a punch to the gut.

She can't stay here. It'll kill her if she does.

It's the clearest her mind has felt in a long while and even just thinking it brings a wave of relief washing over her so sweetly that it makes Karen want to cry for an entirely different reason.

She's thinking through the logistics before she even knows what's going on and it's like she's on autopilot, watching herself move like she's outside her own body. Entirely too calm for how she's feeling, Karen moves upstairs and is packing her suitcase. She's throwing random things in there, thinking about how much gas she has in the car, thinking about how she'll call her parents from the road... thinking about what she's going to tell them.

(failed marriage, abandoning her husband, her duties. good girls don't do things like this.)

She moves into Holly's room next. Her daughter is sitting in the middle of her floor, brushing her doll's hair, humming to herself.

Karen makes sure to wipe her face of the last of her tears and smile before she gets Holly's attention. "Holly, baby," she croons, entering the room and kneeling on the floor. "How would you like to go to Disney World? Right now?"

Holly's eyes widen, excitement dawning in her gaze, warring with an apprehension that's too piercing for her years. "But, what about school?"

"Your teacher already said it was ok," Karen says, the lie slipping easily from her lips. "It'll be fine, baby girl. I promise." Holly might not need her, but Karen needs Holly and she can't let go.

Holly lets out a giggle, gives her a smile, and then both of them are packing a bag for Holly as well, making sure to save room for her doll and her picture books.

It's only when Karen's moving the bags down the hall towards the stairs that she looks at the door to Mike's room and she freezes.

She should wait, wait for him to get home, take him with her, save him from this cold hell.

But Mike doesn't need her anymore. He has his own life, people who he needs, who need him. *He'll be fine, probably won't even miss her.*

Still...

Chewing on her lip, Karen enters Mike's room, reflexively scowling at the mess, and takes a moment to find a piece of paper and a pen. She scribbles a quick note, hand shaking, distorting her handwriting. It's not a lot, not enough, but it'll have to do, and she leaves the paper on his desk.

Karen bites back a sob, but her lips wobble, her eyes fill with tears.

She leaves Mike's room, shuts the door behind her. She puts the suitcases in the car, straps Holly in, and drives away.

She doesn't look back.

The bell rings and Mike lets out a sigh of relief. *Finally, the weekend.*

He scoops up his Chemistry text and notebook into his arms and is out of his seat like a shot. A smile tugs at his lips as he makes his way down the hallways to his locker, weaving effortlessly through the crowds of students that are milling around their lockers, excitement buzzing through the air. It's *Friday* and the weekend is here.

He's in front of his locker, backpack braced on his thigh as he loads up what he needs for the weekend's homework, when a slim pair of arms wraps around his waist. Mike feels El's warmth bleed through the thin sweater he's wearing and he smiles. He slides his backpack down to the bottom of his locker and turns around, El's arms never letting go. "Hello, there," he says, looking down at her.

El's smiling up at him, looking beautiful as always. Her hair's half pulled up, the rest of her curls spilling down her shoulders. She's wearing a dark green sweater and jeans that are probably tighter than should be allowed (but in a way he greatly appreciates with how they hug her hips and thighs). "Hi," she says, sounding so giddy and happy.

That's all it takes before he's leaning down to kiss her, El reaching up to meet him half way. It's been a whole two hours since he last saw her, which is two hours too long in his opinion.

Their lips meet and Mike sighs. His hand slides into her hair, the other curling around the curve of her ribcage, while her arms come up to wrap around his neck to help hold her close. Off in the distance, someone wolf whistles, another person shouts out "Get a room!" Mike ignores them, his senses too full with El – the feel of her lips, the taste of her lip gloss, the smell of her shampoo.

El's mouth moves sweetly against his, tongue teasing but not insisting, and Mike smiles into the kiss. He breathes her in as he

kisses her, pulling her lower lip between his, tugging on it. El lets out a sigh that is music to his ears and Mike feels his heart skip in his chest.

He pulls away first and looks down at her, grin tugging at his lips. "Couldn't wait for me outside, could you?" he teases.

El bites her lip, making Mike groan just a little, and shakes her head. "Nope, literally unable," she says, smiling back. "*Missed* you."

Mike presses a quick kiss to her lips. "Missed you, too." He's smiling like a love-sick fool again, but he doesn't care. Another kiss. "C'mon, the others are probably waiting."

El's arms slide from around his neck and Mike turns back around to finish packing up his things. He closes his locker moments later as he swings his backpack over one shoulder.

El slips a hand into his as they walk through the hallways of Hawkins High, navigating without thinking to the pick-up/drop-off area, where the others are waiting.

Dustin rolls his eyes as he sees Mike and El walking up hand-in-hand. "Mike, seriously, you guys couldn't wait until *after* you left school to make out?"

Mike feels his face contort with confusion and Lucas explains. "You have lip gloss all over your mouth, man."

Everyone, including El, laughs as Mike brings up a hand to wipe away his mouth. He doesn't even care. "What if I was making a fashion statement?"

"Well, it was a fucking messy fashion statement, if you ask me," Max says, lips twisted in a wry grin as they start to head off, walking bikes and holding skateboards as they amble away from the high school. Their spirits are lively, conversation full of laughter and smiles, as they walk, eventually splitting off to head home, full of promises to see each other tomorrow.

Max and Lucas spin off first, heading to arcade on a casual date before they each head home. Dustin leaves next, claiming that he has

something *super important* to do that he doesn't want to share with anyone.

Then it's just Will, El, and Mike, nearing where they need to go their separate ways, Will and El back to one house, Mike to his.

Will looks to Mike. "Hey, did you want to come over for dinner? I'm sure Hop and Mom would be cool with it."

Even though El's looking up at him with hopeful eyes, Mike shakes his head. "Nah, thanks though. My dad's out of town and whenever he is, my mom order's Chinese food for dinner since he hates it. It's great, though."

And it is, it will be. His mom'll orders Chinese food and it'll be relaxing – all of them trying to eat dinner with chopsticks, inevitably failing and moving onto using forks, laughing and having a good time. Holly loves the fortune cookies and Mike just likes all the different kinds of food – some spicy, some not, but all so different than he's used to. He doesn't know if it's any good, if it's anything like the real thing, but that's not what matters.

And, after dinner, his mom'll cajole him into watching some silly romantic comedy movie and Mike'll roll his eyes, but he'll give in, smiling on the inside the entire time, and chuckle as his mom oohs and ahhs her way through the movie, sniffing a bit as the main characters inevitably end up together.

It's a new routine, especially since his dad has only recently started going out town on business on a regular basis. And it's nice – it's *really* nice, like Mike's getting closer with his mom and it's good. It's been easier to talk to her since she found out about El's powers and what really happened in Hawkins Lab and everything else related to it. Yeah, there's still a lot that his mom doesn't know. But some of it's really personal, stuff that even the rest of the Party have only been able to guess at. And the rest of it, well...there's just no neat segue.

But it's getting better. No, it's not perfect – sometimes his mom looks at him like he's a foreign entity, something from another planet entirely, or sometimes her eyes glaze over when he's trying to tell her something, like she was only pretending to be interested and just

can't keep up the façade long enough for Mike to finish talking.

(does she care? he's not perfect, not like nancy. he knows he's fucked up in the past, knows she's been disappointed in him. has she forgiven him? is there any way to make things right, to make up for the past? will she ever look at him and be proud? will she care?)

But, Mike knows it's been hard for her lately. She's been missing Nancy like crazy and Mike also knows that things between his parents have been...weird, distant, made worse by Nancy's absence. So he tries to understand, tries to be patient.

He thinks he mostly succeeds.

So, it's with a final goodbye kiss with El and a clapped handshake with Will that Mike heads home on his own, eagerness tugging, pulling him along.

When he gets home, he notices the absence of his mom's station wagon in the driveway, but thinks nothing of it beyond that. His mom's always running errands, or taking something to someone's house, or rushing out the door to help one of her many friends.

So Mike goes around to the door leading into the basement, unlocking the door with his key, and sets his backpack down near the couch. He pops up to the kitchen to grab a snack (a jar of peanut butter and half a box of crackers) before heading back down to the basement to get his weekend homework out of the way.

He doesn't go up to his bedroom.

He will regret this.

3 hours later and Mike looks up from his history reading with a start, a sudden rush. He glances at the clock that hangs on the wall by the stairs.

It's almost 7 o'clock.

And Mike hasn't heard *anyone* come home.

Concern tugs his eyebrows down to V over his nose. Mike slides his

history book of his lap and gets to his feet. He climbs the stairs slowly, trepidation filling him, hand trailing over the railing like he might need to catch himself.

He steps on to the first floor and peers around in to the kitchen. “Mom?” Into the family room. “Holly?”

Nothing.

He looks out into the driveway. Still empty.

There’s a weird thump his heart gives in his chest and Mike gulps.

His feet carry him upstairs. His palms feel clammy and he doesn’t know why.

Mike opens the door to his parents’ bedroom. “Mom?” he tries again. He hates how small his voice is beginning to sound. But his heart is beating fast now, his limbs feeling like they’re slowly turning to lead.

His mouth falls open at what he sees.

It’s a *mess*, drawers thrown open, clothes hanging over the edges, sprawled on the floor, on the bed.

Mike starts breathing *way too fast*. Fear crawls up his spine.

He rushes to Holly’s room and it’s a similar sight to his parents’.

Mike can’t swallow, his throat is too tight, barely able to suck air into his lungs.

He goes into his room, throwing his door open, not sure what he’s going to find.

It looks like he left it that morning. Now Mike’s really confused.

But then he spots the piece of paper on his desk, one that wasn’t there when he left, and Mike feels the bottom begin to fall out of his heart.

His fingers are trembling as he reaches out for the paper, recognizing

his mother's handwriting – messier than usual, but still recognizably *hers*. And he reads.

His mom's going to his grandparents' house in Florida and has taken Holly with her. She can't stay in Hawkins anymore, needs to get out. She doesn't know if she's coming back.

I didn't want to wait for you, didn't want to take you with me. I don't need you, Michael. You can take care of yourself. I'm sure you'll be fine. These are the words Mike reads. Of course, they're not the words that are *written*, but Mike can read between the lines just fine.

He feels numb, the feeling exploding from the base of his neck, spreading down his spine, into his limbs with heavy, muffled tingling, leaving *nothing* in its wake.

Mike takes a few steps back, shock stealing his breath, making him feel dizzy, untethered.

His mom left him and didn't even wait to say goodbye. She doesn't want him, doesn't *need* him. He's all alone, practically orphaned, cast aside like garbage and left to fend for himself. 15 years old and he's on his own, unwanted. Everything he thought he knew, everything he thought he had is *gone*.

His whole life is a lie, suddenly laid bare. And everything he thought was fine is rotten at the core and hollowed out, a pretty sheen covering a vast pit of *emptiness*.

Nancy's gone, off living her new life, too busy to talk to him. His dad's never home anymore, and always looks disappointed at Mike when he is, like his son's a failure, a disappointment, a promise unfulfilled. And his mom...she's just left him, unconcerned about his well-being, like he doesn't even matter at all, like he's *never* mattered.

Mike doesn't know who he is anymore and he's trembling, life cracking, shattering into pieces.

What's he supposed to do now? Where's he supposed to go? What did he do wrong?

Why doesn't anyone want him?

They're in the middle of dinner when El feels it. Cold, numb, *sick*. It crawls inside her belly, spreads to her limbs, makes her feel heavy with *nothing*.

Mike. Oh no.

"El, what's wrong?" It's Joyce, off to El's left, her voice concerned.

El looks across the table to Hop, who's looking back at her, brows drawn down over his eyes, corners of his mouth pinched with the beginnings of a frown. "We need to go get Mike."

It's just El and Jim in his police cruiser as they drive across Hawkins to the Wheeler household. Jim glances over at El every so often, taking in the way her face has paled, the worry lines etched around the corners of her mouth, the tightness around her eyes, the way she sits ramrod straight, like she'll break if she relaxes.

"Do you know what's wrong?" he asks, voice low. He's worried. Even if Jim hadn't cared about Mike – which he does – the fact that El's so worried would make Jim worry at least just as much.

El shakes her head. "I don't know," she answers. There's a quaver in her voice that hits Jim right in the heart. "It's just...wrong. *Lost*."

Suddenly, all the worry that Jim's been storing away when it comes to Mike Wheeler rears its ugly head, twisting in his gut, making him feel vaguely nauseated.

The Wheeler family is synonymous with "picture perfect" as far as Hawkins is concerned. But Jim can see between the lines – *has* been able to, in fact. And Mike has brought up his worries to Jim in the past, concerns about his parents possibly getting divorced.

Jim's seen Ted and Karen interact with each other, seen them interact with their children. He's seen the fault lines fracture and grow, seen Karen's attempts to hold everything together, but miss the mark every time. He's seen the distance that grows with each passing day, seen the way Mike pulls away, defensive, protective, putting on a brave face despite it all. It's one of the reasons Jim has opened up his home as much as he has, never mind that the kid's dating his daughter.

At the end of the day, Jim knows that Mike Wheeler has nowhere else to go.

So when El told him that they needed to go pick up Mike from his house *right now*, Jim had his suspicions about what might be wrong. And everything coming from El just confirms it.

Jim doesn't know what he's going to find when they get to the Wheeler household. But he just knows it's going to be worse than whatever he's imagining.

The sun has long since set when Jim pulls into the driveway leading up to the Wheeler house and he doesn't miss that the driveway is empty, that neither of the Wheelers' cars are parked there. He throws the car into park, kills the engine, and El's out of the car before the engine whine dies down.

"Dammit," Jim mutters as he races after her. "El, wait."

"No, he needs me and he's not *answering me*," she says, charging ahead, down the walkway towards the front door.

Jim uses his longer strides to eliminate the distance between them. "I *know* that," he says, grabbing her by the shoulder. "But, let's be smart about this, ok? We don't know what's wrong. Let me take point on this one. You can be by my side the entire time, just...just let me, please?"

El wobbles a bit, looking up at him with trembling lips, illuminated by the front porch light, and nods. "By your side the whole time?"

"The whole time," Jim nods, sighing with relief as El nods before he

reaches out to ring the doorbell.

There's a long stretch of silence and, though there are a few lights shining through the windows, there's no movement from inside the house.

Jim tries the front door, but it doesn't budge – locked.

“Let me,” El says and, a moment later, he hears the telltale clicks of the locks sliding open.

Jim opens the door, hinges swiveling soundlessly, just as quiet as the interior of the house. The Wheeler house is usually full of noise – kids creating chaos, Karen cooking, Ted watching TV. The silence that instead greets Jim and El is eerie. It makes the hairs on the back of Jim's head stand on end and anxiety flutters in his stomach.

Jim enters the house, El following behind him and making sure the door's closed behind her. “Do you know where he is?” Jim asks, turning to look at his daughter.

El closes her eyes, focuses, and opens them a second later. “Up in his room.” Her voice is as hushed as his is, as if not to attract the attention of whatever unnatural force has invaded the house.

Jim nods and gestures for El to lead the way. He's only familiar with the first floor and a little bit of the basement; he's never had any reason to go upstairs. But he knows El knows the way, so he follows her up the stairs, their steps slow and hushed, muffled further by the carpet.

Jim stops behind El as she approaches one of the open doors along the length of the hallway, both of them freezing as they look into what Jim quickly determines is Mike's room.

Mike's sitting on his bed, shoulders slumped, arms held loosely in his lap. There's a piece of paper in his hands, which are suspended between his knees, hanging limply. He looks pale, too pale, and his breathing is shallow, barely there, his eyes unseeing. It's a look Jim recognizes.

Mike's in shock.

El rushes in, crying out. “Mike, what’s wrong?” Her voice is tinged with worry, edging up into panic.

Jim steps in as El reaches the bed. She kneels next to Mike, knees digging into the mattress. She takes the paper from his hands and sets it aside without looking at it, more worried about the boy in front of her. El grabs Mike’s hands and pulls him towards her, trying to get his attention, but he’s unresponsive.

Jim goes over to pick up the piece of paper El set aside, worry mingling with curiosity to create a strange sensation of dread. He hears El trying to get through Mike, sounding increasing frantic, voice pitching higher and higher.

With a hand that shakes enough to just be perceptible, Jim reaches out and grabs the piece of paper. A hand-written note. And Jim reads it, heart sinking, eyes widening. *Fuck.*

“Mike,” the note reads, “When you read this, Holly and I will be on our way to Florida to your grandparents’ house. I’m sorry I couldn’t wait for you. But I couldn’t stay in this house anymore. I know you’ll be fine. You haven’t needed me in a while. I don’t know if or when I’ll be back. I love you. ~ Mom.”

Shock, disbelief, and sadness swell inside Jim’s chest, breath catching in his chest. *God, poor kid....* How long has Mike been sitting there like this? Feeling unwanted, abandoned, cast aside?

A beat later and cold anger infuses Jim’s veins. *You know what? Fuck you, Karen.* He knows it hasn’t been easy for Karen recently, he knows she’s having troubles in her marriage, troubles with getting used to Nancy being out of the house, troubles coping with what happened to Mike and Nancy with the Upside Down and Hawkins Lab and *all of it*. Jim understands because he’s been there, he’s been to all of those places. But he would never, *never*, just *leave* his child – and make no mistake, at 15 years old, Mike is still a child, no matter how much he’s been through.

Jim takes in a deep breath, anger settling in the pit of his stomach, righteous in its fury, crystalizing his thoughts, every protective instinct rearing up inside of him. Mike may not be his son – hell,

barring an act of god, Mike will be his son-in-law someday – but Jim feels so much for the kid, feels a sharp sense of protectiveness for him. At the end of the day, Mike is part of Jim’s family and that *means* something.

Jim looks down at the piece of paper, creased where his fingers are gripping it tight, and folds it in quarters, slipping it into his pocket. He turns to El, who’s still shaking a non-responsive Mike. “El,” he says, loud enough to get her attention. Mike doesn’t even flinch.

“Dad, he’s not responding,” El says, looking up at him with wide, tear-filled eyes, *pleading*. She’s asking him to fix this, asking him to make it better. Because he’s a grown-up, he’s her father, and that’s what he does.

Jim sighs, assurance coiling tight around his limbs. “El, I need you to go down to the car. In the trunk, there’s a duffle bag. I want you to empty it out and bring it up here.”

“Dad-”

Jim’s not finished. “We need to pack some things for him. I want you to find where he keeps his school things, make sure those are with you. And grab anything else you think Mike might want.”

“Is he coming home with us?” El asks, voice trembling.

Jim nods. “He is, but first I need to get him to register that we’re here. And you’re too attached right now, sweetheart. He needs someone who’s calm right now. And I promise, we’re going to help him.”

“Where’s Karen? And Holly?”

Jim closes his eyes for a moment, gathering strength. Jim’s not sure how much everyone else knows, not sure what Mike wants to tell, to share. Jim knows that El will know everything in due time, but Jim also doesn’t want to take away Mike’s control of the situation. He knows how important that is, especially in times like this. “That’s Mike’s story to tell, ok? For now, you just need to know that they’re not here right now. But, we’re going to take care of him. Now, go

grab that duffle bag and his things, ok? I'll work with Mike."

Jim can see the warring thoughts reflected in El's gaze. But, eventually, she nods. "Ok. I'll be back soon."

El slides off the bed and Jim watches as she leaves the room, taking a moment to look behind her at both him and Mike, worry written across every inch of her face. And then she's gone and it's just Mike and Jim.

Jim blows out a breath through his mouth before he stands in front of Mike and kneels down so he can look up into the kid's face. "Mike, it's Hop. Can you hear me?" No response. Jim takes a moment before reaching out, one hand on Mike's knee, the other gently slapping his cheek. "Hey, kid, c'mon. I'm here, ok? Just let me know you if you can hear me."

It takes another, slightly harder slap before Mike sucks in a deep breath, something more than a gasp, and Jim watches as Mike's eyes regain their focus. Hazy confusion spreads across his face, cutting through the numb sadness. "Hop?" Mike's voice is raspy and thin, sounding lost and small.

Jim smiles, relief swimming in his veins, turning his smile warm. "Yeah, Mike, it's me. I'm here. El's here, too. She's just downstairs."

There's a sigh, but it's shaky. "El," Mike breathes, like just her name alone can solve all his problems, like she's his salvation. It worries Jim, how much Mike relies on El, but one thing at a time. *Need to get through the next hour first.*

"Yeah, El," Jim affirms. "We're going to help you, Mike. Can you tell me what happened?" Jim's knees are starting to complain from where he's crouching, but wild horses couldn't drag him upright. Not when he's getting through to Mike.

Mike closes his eyes, squeezing them shut. "Left me," he says. "Mom, Holly. They're gone."

"Tell me, Mike." Jim's voice is soft, gentle, the opposite of the tight anger that courses through him. Seriously, *fuck* Karen.

"I..." Mike sighs. "I came home. No one was here. Did homework for a while. Realized no one was here. Looked around, found the note." Mike draws in a deep breath. His lower lips trembles, but he clamps his lips tight, getting himself under control. "She's gone. No one's here, Hop."

"You're here, Mike," Jim says, heart breaking at the sadness in Mike's voice. "I'm here. El's here." Jim sighs. "Do you think you can pack some things for me?"

Mike's eyebrow twitches, almost arching. "Why?"

"You're coming home with us, Mike. I'm not going to leave you here, alone."

There's an apprehension in Mike's eyes, like Jim's going to rescind the offer any second. "Really?"

"Yeah, kid," Jim sighs. "Wouldn't lie to you now, would I?"

Mike eyes him skeptically and Jim's reminded of the year Mike and El were separated, the lies Jim told him, the truths he omitted. But, Mike nods. "Ok."

"Good kid." Jim reaches up to ruffle Mike's hair, encouraged by the way Mike ducks away from Jim's reach, even though it's more sluggish than usual. Jim gets to his feet, knees groaning and complaining, and watches as Mike gets to his feet. The kid goes over to his dresser, if still pretty dazed from the way he's moving, and starts rifling through his drawers, grabbing clothes.

El comes back in a minute later, both Jim and Mike looking over at the sound of her approach. She sighs when she sees Mike on his feet. "Mike," she breathes. The duffle bag she's holding drops to the ground as she goes to him and Jim watches as the El wraps her arms around him, holding him tight.

Mike doesn't respond except to pull away. He slips from El's embrace and goes back to pulling clothes from his dresser. El looks at Jim, confused concern on her face, mild hurt lurking around the edges.

Jim shakes his head, though, signaling for her to wait, and nods his

head in the direction of where she dropped the duffle bag.

10 minutes later, El and Jim are guiding Mike downstairs and out the front door. El locks the door behind them with her powers as Jim pushes Mike in the direction of the car. It's concerning, how easy it is to steer Mike, like he's all but given up, shock still gripping him tightly.

Jim waits until Mike's buckled in the back seat before he gets in the driver's seat, El sliding in next to Mike.

And as Jim drives home, he keeps one eye on the rearview mirror, Mike and El's reflection staring back at him. He takes in El's anxiously worried face and Mike's shell shocked one, and it makes him wonder just how this is all going to shake out.

One thing's for certain, though: the next time Jim sees Karen again, they're going to have words. And it's not going to be pretty.

The gravel of the driveway crunches beneath the tires of Jim's cruiser as he pulls up towards home.

It's been a quiet drive home, no one speaking a word as Jim drives across Hawkins. The silence isn't doing anything to ease Jim's worry. Mike's a talker by nature, mouth always moving a mile a minute. It's unusual, *unnatural*, to see him so mute. And, if El's face is anything to go by, she's thinking something similar.

Jim puts the car in park and turns around to look at his daughter. "I'm going to go in and let Joyce and Will know that Mike's here. Can you help him get inside the house?"

El nods. "I can do it."

Jim holds El's gaze for a moment longer before he's getting out of the car and bounding up the stairs, through the front door seconds later.

Joyce and Will are sitting on the couch and they both stand up at the

sight of Jim walking into the entryway.

“What’s going on?” Will asks, urgency in his voice. “Is Mike ok?”

“What happened?” Joyce adds on. Both mother and son are looking at Jim with identical tight expressions.

Jim sighs. “I’ll explain in a bit,” he says. “Just-” He sees Joyce and Will look somewhere behind him and Jim turns to see El and Mike walking into the house, El with her arms wrapped around one of Mike’s, which lies limp at his side.

“Mike!” Will exclaims. “Are you ok?”

Jim watches as Mike flinches, face contorting in a flash of emotion that is too quick for Jim to read, and dread begins to fill his stomach. The shock is beginning to fade...and Jim doesn’t know what’s going to take its place.

Jim looks over at Joyce – oh good, she saw it, too – and she nods her head in the direction of the stairs. Jim nods and turns to El. “El, I need to talk to Joyce for a second, ok? Just stay here and...stay here.”

Joyce heads towards the stairs and Jim follows. They step into the hallway, just a few feet from their bedroom, and Joyce turns to look at Jim, urgent curiosity written all over her face. “Jim, what the hell is going on? What happened to him?”

Jim sighs and pinches his nose, eyes squeezing shut. “Karen skipped town, Joyce. Took Holly with her.”

Jim opens his eye to see Joyce’s mouth fall open, her skin paling with shock. “She *what*?”

Jim reaches into his pocket and pulls out the note he saved. “Here. Read it for yourself.”

It’s not a long note and Jim watches as Joyce’s gaze dances over the page, her expression turning more and more shocked and outraged with each passing moment. She reads it once, reads it *again*, maybe even a third time, before she looks back up at Jim. “I can’t believe...I

knew Karen was having a hard time, but...I never thought....” Joyce’s mouth closes, her lips pursing, and Jim can *feel* the ire stoking inside of her. “She just *left* her son?! What did she think he was going to do? How long was he over there *alone*?”

“He didn’t know for a while,” Jim says. “From what I can gather, Mike came home and was doing homework for a few hours before he realized something was wrong. He went upstairs and found the note in his room. I think that’s when El knew something was wrong.”

Joyce sets her shoulders in a line, lips drawn tight. “The next time I see her, I’m going to kick her ass. How *dare* she just walk out on her boy like that?”

It’s heartening, in a weird way, that he and Joyce are so aligned, that his anger is so neatly reflected in her. “I know, trust me, she’s getting a piece of my mind when I see her.”

Joyce stares at him. “He’s staying *here*, Jim. I know he’s dating El, I know it’s weird to have your daughter’s boyfriend stay the night-”

Jim shrugs. “Not the first time it’s happened.”

“-But we can’t just leave him with nowhere to go,” Joyce continues, as if Jim hadn’t interrupted her at all.

“I agree,” Jim says. “That’s why I had him pack a bag and brought over some of his stuff.”

Joyce softens a bit – not much, but enough. “You’re a good man, Jim.” She breathes out a sigh. “God, poor Mike. He doesn’t deserve this, Jim. He’s such a good kid. God, how could Karen *do this*?”

“I don’t know,” Jim says. “She must have her reasons, but...”

“They’re bullshit reasons,” Joyce finishes.

“Yeah.”

And then there’s the sound of a door slamming, followed by shouting – Will, he’s shouting. Jim shares a look with Joyce before they’re both rushing towards the stairs, Jim steps ahead of Joyce.

When he gets down there, Jim only sees Mike standing in the middle of the living room and, out of the corner of his eye, he sees Will disappearing through the front door – following El, maybe?

But Jim keeps his focus on Mike, who's standing there looking wild and panicked. There's a hot flush high on his cheeks, skin pale everywhere else, and his eyes are wide, gaze darting every which way. "Mike," Jim says slowly, like he'll spook the kid if he moves too fast. "Mike, what happened? Is everything ok?"

Mike's gaze lands on Jim and Jim can see the beginnings of the cracks appear, like the first of the dominoes are starting to fall. Mike lets out a laugh that's almost a sob. "No," he says, shaking his head. "I can't."

And then he's taking off towards the door, throwing it open so he can step out into the night air.

Jim's after him like a shot. "Oh, *fuck*."

It's like Mike's swimming through a fog that lingers, clinging to every inch of him, one that takes forever to begin to clear.

For a while, it's just him. Then El's there, but he can't move. Mike can feel her, but movement is out of reach, like his brain has been disconnected from his body.

Hop comes into view, El's warmth fading, and the slap to Mike's cheek is like the breath of fresh air after coming up from spending too long underwater – refreshing and painful. Hop listens and asks gentle questions and doesn't push. But there's pity in Hop's eyes and it grates against Mike's skin.

*(you're broken, rejected. you **don't deserve** pity.)*

The ride over to El's house is stifling. El's pressed against his side and, instead of being comforting, Mike feels like he's suffocating. He wants to tell her to move, to get away-

(don't want to ruin her, too. she's good, not like you.)

-but he can't find his voice, and he knows he doesn't mean it. He loves her, why would he want to be away from her?

By the time Hop finishes driving them to his house, Mike's gritting his teeth and he doesn't know why. And when El wraps her arms around one of his, Mike wants to scream.

Inside, Will asks if he's ok and the worry on his best friend's face is enough to make Mike angry.

Would everyone stop looking at him like he's a fucking child?

Hop and Joyce disappear upstairs to talk, leaving Mike alone with Will and El. He watches as Will and El exchange worried glances, like he's not there...*like he might as well not be there.*

A long, heavy silence stretches over them and it's almost unbearable. Mike feels *something* begin to bubble up inside of him, thick and heavy, *dark*.

A tug on his arm pulls Mike's gaze down and he looks at El. She's looking back up at him with those eyes, all filled with sadness and pity and just...wrong. "Mike," she's saying, her voice gentle and coddling. "Come on, you should sit down." She begins to pull him towards the couch, but Mike rips his arm from El's grip.

"No," he says, practically spitting the word.

El looks at him with confusion. "Mike," she says, slowly. "It's ok, I promise."

Mike lets out a laugh that shocks even him with how ugly it sounds. "What about 'no' don't you understand?" He takes step back and shakes his head. "God, do you have to be so clingy? I'm not a fucking baby, you know. I don't *need* you to take care of me."

El backs away from Mike, tears shining in her eyes. "Mike, I don't understand. I just-"

"You just *what*?" Mike interrupts, voice rising. "You just feel sorry for

me? You just think I can't take care of myself? Well, let me tell you something. I can take care of myself just fine. I don't need anyone to take care of me. And I sure as hell I don't need *you*."

El stares at him and it's so quiet, you could hear a pin drop. But then her face crumples and she lets out a sob, brushing past him and heading to the front door, slamming it behind her as she leaves the house.

It takes less than a second for Mike to officially hate himself. *Shit, fuck*. God, can't he do anything right? No wonder his mom left him. He's broken and he just ruins everything around him. Maybe he does deserve this...

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" It's Will, his voice raised in a yell.

Mike looks at Will, his mouth agape. "I..." he struggles to say.

But there's a flush on Will's cheeks and he stands tall, shoulders pulled back, back straight. "Look, I don't know what happened to you, ok? And you might be my best friend. But *she* doesn't deserve that, ok? She doesn't deserve for you to treat her like an asshole. Doesn't matter what happened to you." Will looks at him like Mike's lower than dirt and it's nothing less than Mike deserves.

Then Will's moving past Mike to follow El and Mike feels the world tilt on its axis beneath his feet. God, he's going to be sick. Nausea roils inside his stomach, pushing up his throat, souring his mouth. He can't breathe and he feels like he's falling, like he doesn't know which way is up.

Mike sees Hop come down the stairs, Joyce right behind him. "Mike," Hop says, voice gentle. "Mike, what happened? Is everything ok?"

Is everything ok? Mike lets out a laugh and it sounds a bit manic even to his ears. No, everything is not ok. Nothing is ok. In fact, nothing's been ok for a long time and it's too much and he's drowning, the ground disappearing from beneath his feet. He's in free fall and there's nothing to catch him, nothing to stop him from shattering into a million pieces. And he can't, he just *can't*. "No," Mike breathes. "I

can't."

So he runs.

Jim follows Mike out the door, practically running after him. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Will and El standing on the porch, El crying, Will hugging her.

But Jim's focused on Mike as he heads down the porch steps, gravel beneath his feet. "Mike, wait! Stop, dammit!"

At that, Mike does stop, whirling around to glare at Jim, illuminated by the porch lights. "Or what, are you going to arrest me? Perfect, just fucking perfect."

"Mike, I'm not-

"No, *wait*. Why don't you call my *mom*? Oh wait, that's right. Well, good luck with that, *Chief*," Mike spits out. "She's gone, remember? She *left*. She left and she's not coming back. She took Holly and ran and left me here all alone! God, she didn't even wait for me to get home. Just wrote a fucking note and fucking skipped town! So, you might as well arrest me. It's not like I have anywhere else to go!"

Oh shit, Jim thinks. Mike's spiraling, spinning out of control. And nothing Jim can do can stop it now. "Mike, c'mon..."

"And you know what, I don't even blame her for leaving. I'm such a monumental fuck up, right? Not perfect like Nancy. Not precious like Holly. Just stuck in the middle – a *colossal* disappointment. God, she probably couldn't *wait* to be rid of me. It's not she's ever understood me. And my dad? Well, he's never wanted me, much less understood me. Not enough of a man, not strong enough to stand up for myself, too fucking nerdy, not what I'm supposed to be. I mean, why try to understand something so fucked up, so beyond repair, right?"

"Mike, you know that's not true," Jim says, trying to cut in.

“Oh, it’s not? Then why don’t they ever talk to me? Why is my dad never home? Why did my mom leave? I must have done *something*.” Mike stops, letting out a laugh, but it’s filled with panic. “I mean, that has to be it, right? I did something? I mean, it’s fitting. I can’t do *anything* right. I just yelled at El, I just *made her cry*. I love her more than *anything* and I can’t even keep from fucking that up.” Mike’s breathing is picking up and Jim finds himself taking slow, steady steps towards him.

“Mike, breathe.”

“I *can’t*. I can’t breathe, Hop. I don’t understand, why did they leave? What did I do?” Jim’s standing in front of Mike now, can see the tears beginning to form in his eyes. “Tell me, I don’t get it. I need to know so I can fix it, so I can make it better.” Mike’s face just falls apart. “Tell me why they don’t love me.”

And with that, Mike bursts in to tears. Jim rushes forward and pulls Mike into a hug just before the kid can fall to the ground. Jim holds him close, arms tight around him, as Mike’s body shakes with sobs. “My fault,” Mike says through tears that thicken his voice, making him almost unintelligible.

“No, it’s not your fault, Mike,” Jim says. “You didn’t do anything, ok?”

“Then *why*? Why did they leave?”

Jim sighs and holds Mike even tighter. “People are fucked up, Mike. Your parents are fucked up. You did nothing wrong, you hear me? *Nothing wrong*.” It must be something close to the right thing to say because Jim feels Mike hug him back, arms tight around his torso, heart-wrenching sobs tearing from his throat.

Jim gulps, feeling his own eyes water. How long has Mike been holding on to all of this? How long has he been drowning? This is a lifetime of disappointment, of failed relationships and equally failed communication. This is Mike cracking under the pressure of never feeling good enough, of never feeling like his parents understand or even support him, to the point where he doesn’t even think his parents love him.

God, the next time he sees Karen, he's going to give her a very loud piece of his mind. And the next time he sees Ted? He's going to punch him in the throat. *Fuck both of them.*

Jim's not sure how long he stands there, holding up Mike as he cries. The chill of the mid-November night is starting to get to him and, somewhere along the way, Mike's weight starts to droop as he begins to run out of steam, his tears exhausting him both physically and emotionally.

For a moment, Jim doesn't think he's going to be able to keep holding Mike upright as the kid slumps further and further against him. But then, it's like something's lifting him, pulling him up. Jim cranes his neck to look over his shoulder. El and Will are still standing on the porch, looking shocked and sad. But there's the telltale signs on El's face that she's using her powers – the intensity of her stare, the way her eyes and mouth tighten.

But, even with El's help, they can't stay out there forever. Mike's continuing to lose the battle against gravity, if the way his head is beginning to lull is any indication. And Jim realizes he needs to get both of them inside before Mike falls asleep standing up.

Jim shifts his hands so that he can hold Mike by the shoulders. "Hey, Mike," he says, pulling back to look the kid in the face. "C'mon, let's get you inside. Time for bed for you, I think."

"Kay," Mike all but breathes out, voice ragged.

Jim turns so he can walk Mike inside and nods at El, telling her to let Mike go if she's still holding him up. Just in case she is, Jim makes sure to grab a hold of Mike's arms so he doesn't fall to the ground. It's a real possibility, too, given how Mike is swaying. "Alright, c'mon, this way," Jim says softly. He begins walking, pushing Mike as he does so.

It's a slow journey upstairs to the guest room and Jim keeps a hand on Mike's arm as he reaches out to turn on the light of the guest room. It's a different room than the one Mike stayed in when he was helping after El was taken – that's Will's room, now – but the furniture is still the same even if the room is a little smaller.

"C'mon, bed's over here." Jim pushes both of them into the room and closes the door behind him. "Alright, Wheeler, pants and shoes off." Jim plucks at the sleeve of Mike's sweater. "You got a t-shirt on underneath?" When Mike nods, Jim continues. "Sweater off, too. Sleeping in your clothes is not comfortable."

Mike starts pulling his sweater off over his head as Jim goes to turn down the blankets. Mike drops the sweater to the ground before kicking off his shoes and taking off his jeans, leaving him in just a t-shirt and boxers. "Alright, in bed, kid," Jim says with a gentle push. Mike crawls in – well, more like *falls* in – and burrows beneath the blankets.

Jim pushes aside the clothes on the floor with his foot and kneels next to the bed. Mike's head has barely hit the pillow and he's already half asleep. "Hey," Jim says, voice just above a whisper. "You're going to be ok, Mike. You know that, right? You're not going to be alone, I promise."

Mike gulps and fresh tears shine in his eyes. "How do you know?"

"Because you got us, Mike. Me and El and Will and Joyce and all of your friends. Hell, I know you have Nancy, even though she's in New York. You called her recently?"

Mike shakes his head, breathing in a shaking gulp of air. "No, she's too busy to talk."

Jim nods. "Yeah, Jonathan's been going through the same thing. It's a rough adjustment, going off to college, figuring it out." Jim sighs. "You should call her tomorrow, she'll want to hear from you, want to know what happened."

Mike takes a moment to think it over before he nods. "Ok."

Jim reaches out and ruffles Mike's hair. "Get some sleep, kid. We'll talk more in the morning."

"Ok," Mike says. Jim stands and Mike continues. "Can you tell Will and El I'm sorry?"

"They deserve to hear that from you, Mike."

“Ok, you’re right.”

Jim goes over to the door and is just reaching out to turn off the light when Mike speaks again. “Hop?”

Jim switches off the light and turns to look back. “Yeah?”

The light from the hallway illuminates Mike’s face and Jim can see a small smile pulling at Mike’s lips. It’s one of the most encouraging things Jim’s ever seen. “Thanks.”

There’s a lot packed into that simple word, a million meanings. Jim hears all of them. He smiles back. “Anytime.”

When Hop leads Mike back into the house, Will and El follow, going no further than the base of the stairs as they watch Hop help Mike up towards the guest room like he’s drunk or sick or something.

El’s stomach is filled with a complicated mix of emotions. Her eyes still feel dry and sticky with her earlier tears, the pang of hurt when Mike snapped at her still resonating in her blood. But it’s overwhelmed with worry and sadness and, most of all, love.

El knew things were bad at Mike’s house. But she didn’t know *how* bad. And she never could have guessed that Karen would just abandon Mike like that.

“Did you know?”

It’s Will’s voice and El looks over at her brother. “I knew some of it,” El says. “Not all of it, though. You?”

Will shakes his head and it’s only now that El’s looking that she can see the sad shock on Will’s face. “No, I had no idea. I mean....” Will trails off, gulping. “I knew Mike and his dad didn’t really get along, but....” Will shakes his head. “His mom just left him? All by himself?”

The thought of what Mike must have felt – what he must still be feeling, given what just happened outside – brings a lump of tears to El's throat and she swallows heavily. "It's horrible." Anger flares El's blood – anger at Karen, for putting Mike through what he's experienced, for making him feel unwanted and unloved. How could *anyone* do that to Mike, much less his parents? Mike was...sweet and funny and so smart. He loved his friends so ferociously, would do everything and anything for them. He made El feel special every day, made her feel loved and safe and cherished. She loved him so much she could hardly bear it.

"I should tell the others," Will says. "Maybe not all of it, just the important parts. They should know."

El nods. "Tomorrow, we'll tell them."

Will smiles, though the expression is sad, and shakes his head. "No, I'll tell them. You should stay with him. He's going to need you."

El smiles and feels like she's going to cry any second. "Ok, thanks."

Together, Will and El go over to the living room couch and wait for Hop to come back down.

And, when he does a few minutes later, Will and El are on their feet instantly. "How is he?" Will asks, beating El to the punch.

Hop sighs. "Well, he was practically asleep when his head hit the pillow, so I'd be surprised if he isn't completely out by now." Hop pauses, shaking his head. "He's got a hard road ahead of him – and I have no idea what's going to happen when Ted gets back to town and when or if Karen gets back. We're going to need to be there for him, ok?"

"Of course," El cuts in. That should go without saying. "Can I see him?"

Hop gives her a look. "Even if I said no, which I won't, I know you'd just end up in there eventually. Just...let him sleep for a while, would you?"

El nods, even though she wants to run up there right now and give

Mike a hug, tell him she's not mad at him, that she knows he was just hurting when he said those things, that she knows he didn't mean them.

But she also knows Mike needs to rest. So she stays out of the guest room for a while. She and Will pass the time by watching a movie and after, El heads upstairs to take a shower, to wash away the evening as best she can. She goes into her room and reads until she can't read anymore.

The clock reads nearly midnight when El slides out of bed and abandons her room for the guest room.

El cracks open the guest room door and peers inside. It's mostly dark, with only fragments of light from the front porch light outside below illuminating the room. Mike's asleep, curled up with his back facing the door, his breathing slow and deep. Even asleep, his presence beckons and El slips inside, shutting the door. She navigates her way slowing through the dark room, making sure not to run into the bed.

As quietly and steadily as she can, El pulls the blankets back enough so she can slide under the covers and into the halo of Mike's warmth. She drapes an arm over his waist, hooks a leg over his curled up ones and just looks at him. Mike's face is slack with sleep, lips parted just a bit. It's too dark to see his freckles, but El has the patterns mostly memorized, so she knows where they are – god, she thinks she could trace them even in the dark.

She's not sure how long she lays there, just watching. But, eventually, he sucks in a deep, sudden breath, waking with a start. El watches as he opens his eyes and she knows the moment he realizes she's there when the look on his face turns sad, brow furrowing, lips turning down. "El?"

"Yeah, it's me."

There's a long pause and El makes no move to fill it – makes no move in general as she stays where she is, maintaining what small distance is between them. But, Mike speaks eventually and his words break her heart. "What are you doing here?" he asks and El hears the meaning behind them. *Why are you with me? Why haven't you left me?*

Aren't you mad at me?

"I wanted to be with you, to make sure you're ok," El says. "I'm here because I love you."

Mike closes his eyes and draws in a deep breath. "You shouldn't," he says. "I hurt you, El. I'm a horrible person."

El closes the distance, scooting closer to pull Mike into a hug. "No, you're not, Mike. You're good, you're *so good*."

Mike's lower lip trembles and El can see how hard he's trying to keep from crying. "I don't deserve you."

El shakes her head. "It's not about deserving, Mike. It's about what we want. And I want you. Only you."

Mike bows his head and El shifts, scooting up so she can hug him and cradle his head against her neck and shoulder. Mike wraps his arms around her, burrowing his face against her skin, legs curling up beneath hers so the tops of his thighs are pressed against underside of hers as she wraps her legs around his waist to hold him close. "I'm so sorry," he whispers against her shoulder.

"I know," El says. God, she can feel the misery pouring off of him. "You have nothing to be sorry for."

Mike sniffs and El feels the moisture of his tears soak through her shirt. "Please don't leave me."

El wraps her limbs tighter around him and holds him even closer. "Never."

The weekend is quiet and sad. Will tells the rest of the Party about what happened with Mike's mom and some of the ensuing fall out, but he doesn't tell them about some of the more private things that Mike said when he was yelling at Hop.

El and Mike spend most of the weekend curled up with each other, as he finds solace in her presence and she takes pleasure in being able to comfort him.

And when Mike goes back to school on Monday, he's quiet, subdued. He barely speaks up during class and everyone, teachers included, are not sure what to do about it.

There's rumors about something happening at the Wheeler house and it's not gone unnoticed that neither Karen nor Ted Wheeler have been seen in days.

But Mike's not really paying much attention to the rumors. He floats through the days, snaps at his friends sometimes, and always apologizes immediately after. They understand and even though they all don't know all the details, they know enough, know that it can't be easy, what Mike's going through. So they give him space when he needs it, support when he doesn't, and always make sure he knows how much they care about him.

But, of course, Karen Wheeler is still MIA and Ted is still out of town.

There are things still left to resolve.

It's well after dark when Karen arrives at her parents' house. The front light is on, as well as the light inside the front window, so Karen knows someone is awake, at least. They know she's coming – she'd called somewhere back in Ohio.

Holly's asleep in the backseat and Karen is careful not to wake her as she carries her from the car.

The front door opens before Karen can get there and her mom steps out, robe wrapped tight around her, a worried disapproving look on her face. "Karen, honey, we were getting worried."

There's a lot Karen knows her mom isn't saying, but Karen's glad she's not saying it quite yet. "I know, Mom. We needed to stop and

get dinner and it took a little longer than I thought.”

Her mom purses her lips and just shakes her head a bit, silver bob swishing around her face. “Well, let’s get you inside. Your father can get your bags and we’ll get little Holly tucked into bed.” *And then we’re going to have a conversation, young lady* is what Karen’s mom *doesn’t* say, but Karen hears loud and clear.

Karen puts Holly to bed in one of the guest rooms and, when she gets out to the living room, her dad has piled her suitcases in the front hall, both of her parents standing there.

There’s an awkward silence before Karen’s dad sighs. “Well, come over here and give your old man a hug.”

Karen feels the tears threaten to overtake her again as she goes over and greets her father, pressing a kiss to his cheek as she hugs him. “Hi, Daddy.”

Her mom swoops in next, holding Karen close, arms tight around her, before she pulls back and looks at her daughter. “Come on, let’s sit down and you can tell us what happened.”

So, Karen does. She tells them about her failing marriage, about how she feels suffocated in her own house, about how her life’s falling apart and she has no way of putting the scattered pieces back together. She tells them about what drove her to come down, about how she doesn’t know what’s going to happen next.

There’s a lot Karen’s parents disapprove of – how she just left, how she walked out on her husband, how she left her son behind *alone*, how everyone’s going to be talking about the scandal of it all. But they’re also worried about her, Karen can tell. At the end of the day, they’re still her parents, they still love her.

That night, Karen sleeps deeply and doesn’t dream. She doesn’t wake up until almost 9 o’clock. It’s the best sleep she’s gotten in years.

By Sunday, though, it hits Karen. What she did, how she did it. Nausea ripples through her. *Mike*. Oh god, she left her son. She *abandoned* him. Tears gather in the corners of her eyes and she wants

to be sick.

But, instead, Karen rushes for the phone in her parents' kitchen and dials not her home phone number, but the number to Jim's house. Because that's where Mike will be and she *needs* to talk to him. She needs to tell him...something, anything – beg for his forgiveness, explain what was going through her head, *anything*.

The phone rings twice before someone picks up. "Hello?" It's Jim and Karen's stomach gives a lurch.

"Jim, it's-"

"Karen." The way Jim says her name is flat and low, full of anger. "You are so lucky Joyce isn't here to pick up the phone."

Karen snuffles at the thought of her friend being angry with her. "Is Mike there?"

"Yeah, no, he's out at the movies with El and his friends," Jim says. "But, even if he was here, I wouldn't let you talk to him."

Karen bristles with indignation. "You wouldn't let me talk to my own son?"

"The son you abandoned, you mean? The son you left with just a note and a half-assed explanation?" Jim's voice is quiet, his anger cold and piercing even through the phone.

"Oh, you know."

"Fuck off, Karen. Of course I know. Who do you think picked up the pieces you left behind? Who do you think brought him here? I had to go and clean up the mess you made, Karen. I held him as he cried and wondered why his parents don't love him. How am I supposed to even answer that, Karen? I need you to tell me, because I have no fucking clue." Jim pauses and Karen can hear him taking in a handful of deep breaths. But Karen's too busy feeling like the bottom's fallen out of her stomach. She feels too warm, her palms clammy, and everything sways around her.

But, Jim continues. "You want to talk to him, you come back and talk

to him face to face,” he says, practically spitting the words. “And only if he wants to see you, understand? It’s his fucking call and you will give him whatever space he needs, am I clear?”

Tears are trailing down Karen’s face and she nods, even though Jim can’t see it over the phone. “Yes, I understand.”

“Good. Call me if you decide to come back.” And then Jim hangs up on her, doesn’t even say goodbye or give her the chance to respond.

Karen couldn’t, even if she wanted to, as her tears take over and she sobs. She’s not sure how long she stays there, leaning against the kitchen counter. Her parents have taken Holly out for lunch and ice cream, leaving Karen alone in the house, but Karen’s mostly able to collect herself before they get back.

And yet, even though guilt courses through her at the thought that Mike doesn’t think she loves him, it takes her two more days before she’s ready to head home, two more days before she can screw up the courage to get back in the car and drive back to Indiana.

There’s a day trip to Disney World in there, to fulfill the promise she made to Holly. It’s a nice distraction, but a hollow one.

But, Tuesday morning, Karen packs herself and Holly back in the station wagon, listens to her mother’s admonishments to make things right, and then she’s heading back, back to face what she’s done, back to try and fix things. *If they can be fixed.*

Halfway home, she stops by a payphone and calls Jim at work to let him know she’ll be coming over that night. Jim gives her a time – 7 o’clock – and hangs up.

The closer Karen gets to Hawkins, the more her heart pounds in terror. She feels like she’s slinking back, tail between her legs, and she’s *scared*. Scared of facing Jim, even more scared of facing Mike, of hearing what he’s going to say to her.

But she presses on and arrives back in Hawkins just after 5 o’clock. She begs one of her friends, a mom of one of Holly’s classmates, to watch her youngest for the evening, claiming that there’s been a

family emergency and she has no one else to turn to. Lisa agrees, but the look she's giving Karen says that she's going to be pressing for details and soon, and the disapproval that's there tells Karen that Lisa knows more than she's letting on.

Then Karen's back in the car and she's heading over to Jim's house. Her hands shake as she clutches the steering wheel, knuckles white from the force of her grip. Hell, her whole body's trembling and she feels like she's going to burst into tears at the drop of a hat.

But, before she knows it – *oh god, she's not ready* – she's pulling up the driveway to the Hopper household. Both Jim's police cruiser and Joyce's sedan are parked – everybody's home.

And there's Jim, sitting on the porch swing, arms crossed over his chest.

Karen gulps and takes a deep breath, a futile attempt to calm herself, before she gets out of the car. She heads towards the front door and knows Jim sees her when he gets up and meets her halfway. Then he's grabbing her arm and leading her away from the house.

"Jim, what the hell?"

"Walls aren't that thick and I don't want Mike overhearing you. He doesn't know you're here and he's not going to know unless I like what I hear, Karen."

Karen swallows down the anger that bubbles up inside of her, but she recognizes she has absolutely no leverage here. Even though it's her son Jim's barring her from seeing, Karen's the one with the mountain to climb.

Jim stops when they're well enough away from the house and lets Karen turn to face him. "Alright, talk," he says, arms crossing over his chest.

"What do you mean, 'talk'?" Karen says, anger getting away from her for a bit.

"Tell me just what the fuck you were thinking when you decided it was a good idea to leave your 15 year old son and just skip town. Tell

me what the fuck is going on, Karen.” Jim’s voice is low, his tone even, and Karen can *feel* the waves of anger pouring off of him.

Karen’s earlier tears make a reappearance and she’s wrapping her arms around her torso in a self-hug. For a moment, there are no words. “I wasn’t thinking, ok?” She lifts a hand to wipe away the tears that have escaped. “I know I’m a horrible mother, I *know* that. I just...I couldn’t breathe in that house anymore, Jim. It’s like, one second I was fine and the next, it was like I was in a stranger’s life. And I wanted to wait, I tried, but I felt like I was *dying*, Jim and I knew I couldn’t stay a moment longer.” There’s no more holding back the tears. “And I know, I *know*, I don’t deserve Mike’s forgiveness. Nothing I can do will ever make up for what I’ve done.”

Jim’s looking down at her with an unreadable expression. “You could have called me, Karen. Or Joyce. We would have helped you. You didn’t have to do this alone. We could have stopped this from happening.”

“You can’t fix this, Jim! No one can! It’s just broken and I’ve been trying to put it back together and *I can’t*, ok?” Karen sobs. “I know I made a mistake and if you don’t think Mike should see me, then I respect that. But, please, is he ok?”

Jim’s face softens just a bit and Karen’s tears fall all the harder. “He’s surviving, Karen. But he’s been hurting for a long time. It’s going to take a long time for him to heal.”

Karen sniffles, tries to wipe away the tears that just keep coming. “But why didn’t he say anything?”

The softness in Jim’s face disappears. “Did you ever even ask him?”

“Of course I have,” Karen all but yells. “But he doesn’t talk to me!”

“So, what, you ask him once and then when he doesn’t answer, you never try again? Or let him know that when he does want to talk, that you’re ready when he is?”

“O-of course I told him that.”

“And did you listen when he tried to tell you what’s wrong? Maybe

he never said the words ‘Mom, I have a problem’, but that doesn’t mean he wasn’t telling you he didn’t have one.”

It’s a weird mix, being angry and sad at the same time, but somehow, Karen’s achieved it. “Well, how am I supposed to know if he doesn’t say it?”

“By *listening* to him!” Jim scoffs. “Karen, that kid of yours never fucking shuts up. He wears his heart on his sleeve and, yeah, he may not say the exact words, but they’re there, ok? He talks around his problems because he doesn’t want to admit outright that he has them, Karen. Because he’s been taught that he shouldn’t have *any* problems. Have you never paid attention, really paid attention, when he’s talking to you?”

Karen freezes, like she’s been punched in the gut. When did Jim get to know her own son better than she does? How did this happen? “I don’t know what to do,” she admits, her voice small, wind out of her sails.

Jim casts his gaze upward, like he’s gathering strength, and he sighs. “Just talk to him. Ask him how his day was, or what movies he and his friends want to go see. Tell him about your day, ask for his opinion on things. He might not always answer, but keep asking, keep talking. And when he’s done, don’t push him, ok? Be available when he needs you. And make no mistake, he needs you Karen. He might not know that, but he needs you.”

There’s a long silence that’s only broken by the sound of Karen sniffing. After a few moments, Karen looks up at Jim and is aware she’s about to beg. “Can I see my son? Please? I need to see him, Jim. I need to *try*.”

Another long silence. Then Jim nods. “Ok, let me tell him you’re here. He might not want to see you, though. Will you be ok if he doesn’t?”

Karen lets out a tear-filled laugh. “I’ll have to be, won’t I?”

Jim gives her a small, crooked smile. “That’s a girl. C’mon, I’ll go ask him.”

Karen follows Jim up to the front porch, where he makes her wait while he goes inside. Karen sits on the porch swing and *waits*. It feels like hours pass while she sits there alone, even though it's probably only a few minutes, and she's trembling again by the time she hears the door open.

Karen rushes to her feet when she sees Mike stepping outside. He's not looking at her as he closes the front door and it doesn't escape her notice that he stands there for a few seconds, eyes closed, before he turns to her all the way and looks at her. "Mom," he says. It almost makes Karen cry again, the way he greets her. So guarded, so distant. Like he can't afford to give her more than that.

Suddenly, Karen's nervous. Suddenly, she's thinking this is a horrible idea. But, she presses on. "Mike," she says, her own voice shaking. "Um, will you sit with me, please?" she gestures to the porch swing she was just sitting on. But she rushes to continue. "But, we can stand, if you want. I just thought might be easier if – what do you want? Your choice."

There's a quirk of one of his eyebrows, curious but confused, but Mike nods in the direction of the porch swing. "We can sit, I don't mind."

It takes a moment for both of them to sit and Karen looks over at Mike, her hands folded in her lap. She wants to reach over and hug him, but he's curled in on himself, shoulders slumping and even though he's facing her, there's part of him that looks like he's getting ready to run at any moment.

The silence that stretches between them is thick, heavy, and so awkward. Karen's heart leaps into her throat and she knows she needs to be the first one to speak, but she doesn't know where to start. Her son's looking at her like she's going to hurt him at a moment's notice and it's breaking her heart.

"I'm sorry." It's Karen speaking, but it still catches her by surprise. "I'm so sorry, Mike. You don't deserve any of what I did to you."

Mike shrugs and looks down. "It's ok, Mom. You don't have to explain."

Karen moves closer and reaches out, resting a hand on Mike's knee. "No, Mike, it's not ok. What I did was *not* ok. A good mom doesn't abandon her son because she's having her own problems. I screwed up, Mike. *I did.*"

Mike looks up at her, face kept carefully neutral, like he doesn't want her to see what he's feeling. "Mom, it's fine. I get it. I wasn't important at the time."

The way Mike says it is so matter of fact, like it's just the truth. Karen chokes on a sob. "No, Mike, *no*. You are important to me, you *are*. I made a bad decision. I messed up really bad. And you suffered for it. I should have waited, I should have. I know that now. Even if I still left, I should have waited for you to come home."

She's crying, quiet tears rolling down her cheeks. "I thought you would be fine and I was wrong. I was so wrong. I was hurting so bad that I made too many assumptions to help make myself feel better." She's rambling now and she can't stop, the words practically tripping over themselves as they push past her lips. "And it kills me to think how much I hurt you, how much I've been hurting you. And I'm sorry, I'm so sorry that I haven't been there for you, Mike, for *everything.*"

She stops to take a breath, but can't stop the tears that just keep coming. "I love you so much and I know I can never make up for what I did. And I don't blame you if you can never forgive me. I'll understand. But I want to try to make it up to you, if you'll let me."

For a moment, there's nothing but the sound of Karen's sniffing and she knows she must look like a mess, but she doesn't care, not at all, not when her heart is in her throat waiting to see what Mike's response is going to be, if he has one at all. And she hopes, prays to whatever higher power that'll listen, that she hasn't ruined her relationship with her son beyond all recognition.

"You love me?" The words hit Karen like a punch to the heart. He sounds so *lost*, so small, that Karen feels a wave of fresh tears take over her.

"I do, baby. So much."

As Karen watches, Mike's lower lip begins to quiver and his brow furrows – he's trying to hold back tears and it kills Karen that she did this to him. "But then...." He pauses, gulping, trying to gain some control. "Why?"

"Why what, sweetheart?"

A pause, a heartbeat. "Why did you leave me?"

Karen almost immediately leads into an explanation, but she stops herself. Mike's not asking why she left. He's asking why she left *him*. "Oh, sweetheart, I didn't leave you. That's not why I left. I would have taken you with me if you'd been there. And I know I shouldn't have run to begin with, but I panicked. And maybe I shouldn't be telling you this, but I've been hurting a lot and I haven't been dealing with it well. And I may have a lot of regrets, but you're not one of them. You will *never* be one of them." Karen pauses, gulping. "You're my darling boy and I will always love you. And I'm so sorry, for everything."

Unable to resist anymore, Karen reaches out for Mike, reaches out for a hug, and is relieved beyond measure when he hugs her back. And then her heart breaks anew when she hears him sob. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he mutters over and over again, tears soaking her blouse, but Karen just holds on so tight, even as she continues to cry herself.

"Don't be sorry," she whispers, bringing up a hand to cradle the back of his head. "Nothing to be sorry for." They sit there, holding each other, both of them crying, Karen trying her best to console her son, hoping she's succeeding in some small measure. *Anything would be better than nothing.*

Eventually though, Mike pulls away and Karen lets him go. She averts her eyes for a moment as Mike wipes his eyes with his sleeve. And when she looks back, she has a question she needs to ask him. "Did...did you want to come home with me, sweetheart?"

When Mike looks away, Karen has her answer. And though it makes her want to cry again, she manages to keep it together. "I think...I think I want to stay here, tonight," Mike says, glancing at her before looking down again, like she'll demand he go with her. "I just...don't

know if I'm ready."

Karen takes in a deep breath and nods. "That's ok, Mike. I understand. And it's fine, it really is." She sighs. "Will you come see Holly tomorrow after school, at least? I know she misses her big brother."

A small smile pulls at the corners of Mike's lips for a second before he nods. "Yeah, I'll come home tomorrow."

Karen sighs with relief. "Good, good. I, um, I should go, then. I left Holly with one of her friends and I probably can't leave her there much longer." Karen stands and Mike does the same.

"Ok, yeah, you should go get her." Mike fidgets with the fabric of his sweater, weight shuffling back and forth, and Karen knows he has something else he wants to tell her. So she waits. "Mom?" he says eventually.

"Yes, Mike?"

Mike licks his lips and looks down. "I just...I love you."

It's not much – not forgiveness, not a promise of anything – but it's enough. Enough to make Karen's heart feel like it can maybe be whole again.

Karen reaches for Mike again – he's so tall, it still amazes her – and hugs him back. "I love you, too."

Karen leaves moments later, Mike watching her go. And tomorrow, when Mike comes over, Jim's duffle bag slung over his shoulder, Karen will watch as Mike scoops up Holly into a hug, to the sounds of Holly's happy shrieks, yelling "Mikey!" at the top of her lungs, and Karen'll tear up as her children embrace, as she notices the way Mike holds Holly tight, like he missed her and was worried about her, like she means everything to him.

And on Friday, when Ted gets home, Karen will sit him down and they will have a long conversation about the state of their marriage. They won't agree on why it's not working, but they do agree that they can't afford to get a divorce, that it's just not something they can

do. It won't be an easy conversation, but Karen will feel like she's regained some measure of control.

It'll take some time for her relationship with her children, both Nancy and Mike, to get back to any sense of closeness, but they'll get there eventually, because Karen tries and she keeps trying. And Joyce and Jim will mostly forgive her, but it'll always be there in their eyes, the memory of what she did, the hurt she caused. But it'll be ok, because Karen will feel that she deserves it.

And in the end, she'll just be happy she has children who love her and who she loves very much in return.

There's not much else she can ask for.

Jim whistles as he drives over to the Wheeler house on Saturday morning. It's a clear, November day, a bit nippy, leaves blowing across the ground with a light breeze.

It's been a strange, not having Mike over at the house, and Jim doesn't know what he thinks about that (should he feel off not having his daughter's boyfriend sleeping under his roof? That doesn't seem right).

But he's not heading to the Wheeler house to see Mike. No, he's heading to see the other male member of the family.

Jim may be driving the police cruiser, but he's wearing his civvies, jeans and a flannel. Really shouldn't be in uniform for what's about to happen.

Jim's still whistling as he pulls into the driveway. Just his luck, Ted Wheeler is out front, waxing his BMW.

Ted looks over as Jim parks and gets out of the car. "Chief," he calls out in greeting.

"Ted," Jim returns as he walks over.

Ted straightens “What brings you-”

But Ted never gets to finish his question as Jim punches Ted in the face. His glasses go clattering to the ground as Ted almost bowls over. “What the hell!” he cries out, hand going to his now split lip, blood trailing down his chin. “I’ll have your job for-”

Again, Jim doesn’t let Ted finish as he reaches out and grabs the man by the shirt and shoves him down onto his back across the hood of his fancy car. “Now you listen to me, *Ted*. I know you’re not that smart, so listen really close.” Ted struggles a bit, but Jim presses down harder. “That son of yours? The one you don’t seem to care about at all? Anyone would be *lucky* to have him as their kid. That kid is a goddamn saint for putting up with you and your ignorant, oblivious ass. And if I hear anything, even the tiniest whisper, about you mistreating Mike again, I’ll be back. And next time, I won’t just punch you in the face. Do you understand me?”

“I’ll make sure you’re fired for this,” Ted forces out, struggling due to Jim’s weight resting on his chest.

“Yeah, good luck with that.” Knowing Jim won’t get anything else from Ted, Jim lets up and steps away, watching as Ted shakily sits up so he’s leaning against the car. “Have a good one, Ted. Nice car, by the way.”

Jim’s whistling resumes as he heads back to his cruiser and he can’t help the smile on his face.

That felt so much better than he’d imagined.

And the best part? Ted never speaks of this to anyone.

Notes for the Chapter:

I hope I didn't mangle anyone's character too much with this, but I've been dying to deal with the Wheeler family through the lens of Karen and Mike for a *long time* (not to mention Mike's own issues in general).

Future chapters should be shorter (and I'm just

starting to see the end of the tunnel, like a tiny pinprick way off in the distance...), but thank you all so much for sticking with me this far.

And, if anyone really wants to have me flail about mileven in their general direction, find me on Tumblr at @fatechica and feel free to message me or just poke me for whatever reason.

23. Nov 1986 - May 1987

Notes for the Chapter:

Well, this took me a little longer than expected. I started a new position at work and it was just a long week of getting up to speed and, omg, I've been handed a multi-million dollar problem and told to go *fix it*. So, yay? *no pressure, or anything...*

This posting cadence might become the new norm (every 7 days instead of every 4-5) as a result, by the way.

Nov 1986 - May 1987

With the exception of the implosion of the Wheeler family, the Party's sophomore year at Hawkins High is...normal. Like, surprisingly normal.

There's Homecoming, which they don't go to. They plan on it – coordinating buying tickets, arranging how they're going to get there, where they're going to go for dinner beforehand. It's the first year they get to go to Homecoming, since freshman aren't allowed at school dances.

But then first Will, and then El come down with the flu during the week leading up to the dance and, well, since El can't go, Mike won't go and then all of their plans are suddenly ruined. Instead, the Party gathers at the Byers-Hopper household to watch movies with a still sick, but getting better Will and El.

El especially feels horrible for missing Homecoming – she had the perfect dress picked out, pale blue and sparkly, skirt that swishes so nicely around her legs – but Mike reassures her it's fine, that it's not like she planned on getting sick. El leans over to kiss him, cooing at just how sweet and considerate her boyfriend is, but stops herself in time, remembering at the last second that she's still sick, that she could get him sick (Mike presses a light kiss to her cheek, anyway, grinning at her adorably frustrated face when she remembers she

isn't supposed to kiss him).

Classes are harder now that they're sophomores, which is just the natural course of things. And their time is filled, once again, with homework and studying, tests in Chemistry and Geometry, essays for English Lit and World History, various extracurriculars and athletics.

But the biggest difference from freshman to sophomore year is this: Driver's Ed. Will and El aren't quite as keen as the rest of the Party, but all of them are pretty excited to be able to learn how to drive. Mike, Lucas, and Max are especially excited and spend days studying to get their learner's permits. It feels like an important step in growing up, a milestone on the inevitable march toward becoming adults.

Only this is where Mike has a problem.

It's December when Mike passes the written test to get his learner's permit and things at home are still really, *really* uncomfortable. His dad barely looks him in the eye...if he's even home, that is – it seems like Ted Wheeler increasingly finds more and more reasons to be out of the house for longer stretches of time. And his mom? Well, it's getting better, but there's still a mountain of healing that needs to happen between them since she came back after abandoning him. Mike's not sure if he and his mom are at a place where they can do something as mundane as her teaching him how to drive, not sure if he's comfortable asking her for that kind of help yet.

But Mike *really* wants to learn how to drive. He has dreams of taking El out on dates where it's just the two of them, without needing someone to drop them off and pick them up, dreams of just taking drives with her, seeing where the road takes them (maybe even finding somewhere to pull off on the side of the road to make out – or *more* – in the backseat, no one to bother them, no one to interrupt).

Which only ups the awkward factor when the only person Mike can think to go to ask for help learning how to drive is Hopper.

Like, how did Mike get to the point where the only person he can think of to ask for help learning how to drive so he can take his

girlfriend out on unsupervised dates...is the father of said girlfriend? Oh, and did he mention that his girlfriend's dad is the Police Chief?

Yeah, this is going to go swimmingly.

Still, Mike knows Hop likes him. It was Hop (and El) who came and rescued him from the emptiness of his house, who held him while he broke down crying, who gave him a place to stay so he wouldn't be alone, who made sure that it was Mike's choice whether or not to see his mom when she came back to Hawkins.

(Mike's not going to lie, it's been a little weird adjusting to this new turn in the relationship he has with Hop. He knows that it's weird to look up to his girlfriend's father as a father figure for himself, knows that it's not how these kinds of relationships typically work. But there's something so reassuring about Hop that pulls Mike in – approving smiles, solid claps on the back, gentle teasing. It's nothing like he's *ever* had with his own dad and maybe it shouldn't be something he has with his girlfriend's father, but it's nice and Mike doesn't want to let it go.)

So, if Mike knows Hop likes him, if Mike looks up to Hop the way that he does...why is he so nervous about asking the man for a favor?

Mike still has no answer to this question on a cold, Wednesday afternoon in the middle of December. Winter break is almost upon them and the temperatures have taken a turn for the colder, forcing Mike to bundle up in his new winter jacket, hands firmly encased in gloves.

On Wednesdays, Mike usually waits for El to get out of Dance Club (and, really, ever since he discovered what she normally wears to club rehearsals – tight leggings, equally tight tank tops – he's always keen to wait for her before she's had a chance to change and convince her to sneak off somewhere with him to make out, intoxicated by the flush of her skin, the brightness of her eyes; he's successful more often than not).

And, technically, it's still possible for Mike to wait for her, he thinks as he bikes down to the police station. It's only just after 3pm and El doesn't get out of Dance Club until 4:30. And it shouldn't take almost

an hour and a half to ask Hop for a favor, right?

Right?

Despite the nerves that rattle Mike's limbs, he dismounts his bike in front of the police station at around 3:20 and parks it just down the street from the entrance. He heads inside quickly, before he can talk himself out of it, and lets out an involuntary sigh of relief at the warmth that envelops him once he's past the glass doors.

Mike's still removing his gloves and beanie as he approaches where Flo's sitting at the receptionist's desk. Flo gives Mike a smile when she sees him approach. "Mr. Wheeler," she says, gently teasing. "What brings you by?"

Mike's been to the station enough with El that they're all starting to know him now. "Hi Flo," he says. "Is Hop here?"

Flo arches an eyebrow. "Everything ok?" she asks, tone cautious.

Mike realizes, in a sudden rush of embarrassment, that he might be coming down to see Hop by himself if something was wrong with El. "Oh, yeah, um, everything's fine," he says. "I just...need to ask Hop something? If he has time, that is."

Flo grins. "C'mon," she says, waving a hand to follow her along as she moves away from her desk. "It's been pretty quiet, today. He has time."

Mike smiles. "It's Hawkins. It usually is quiet."

Flo gives him a look. "Don't be cute," she says, but she smiles in return.

Mike follows Flo down the hallway and waits as she knocks on the door to Hop's office. "Yeah?" comes the muffled from response from within.

Flo turns and gives Mike a grin. "You can go in. Don't let him scare you."

Mike chuckles, though his nervousness flares, bubbling in his

stomach. "I'll try not to." Flo walks away and Mike takes in a deep breath, hand reaching out for the doorknob. "Nothing to be afraid of," he whispers to himself, gathering courage, before he opens the door.

Hop spots him from where he's sitting behind his desk and the look on Hop gives him – eyes widening in surprise as his eyebrows V in worry – would have been comical if Mike wasn't currently so nervous. "Mike?"

"Hey, Hop. Can I come in? I can go if you're busy."

Hop shakes his head and waves Mike in. "No, c'mon in, I'm not busy. What are you doing here?" Mike enters the office and closes the door. "Wait, you're not here to ask for a job, are you?" Mike turns to look at Hop and can feel the way his face contorts in confusion. "Never mind," Hop rushes to say. "What brings you by?"

Mike sits down and unzips his jacket. "So, um, first of all, everything's fine," he hurries to say...

...and immediately regrets it when Hop scowls. "Well, I wasn't worried before and now I am, kid. Thanks."

"No, wait," Mike continues in a hurry. "I just – I thought you might assume – I didn't want you to–"

Mike cuts off when Hop groans and rubs a hand over his face. "Mike, please. I don't have it in me today for your rambling. It's fine, don't worry about it." Hop removes his hand. "Now, what did you want?"

Mike blows out a breath through his mouth, puffing his cheeks a bit. He takes in another deep breath before forging ahead. "I wanted to ask you a favor." Ok, so far, so good. Sounded pretty confident there, if he ignores the ramble from 15 seconds ago.

"Shoot, kid. What is it?"

Mike glances down quickly at his lap before looking up. "Could you teach me how to drive?"

Clearly, it's the last thing Hop expected coming from Mike because

the older man's mouth drops open just the tiniest bit with shock. "You want *me* to teach you?"

Mike licks his lips. "Yeah, well...." He sighs. "It's not like I want to ask my dad to teach me and, well, things with my mom have been, you know...."

"No one else to teach you, huh?" Hop guesses, voice softening in sympathy.

Mike shrugs. "Pretty much," he says. "And, well, I really want to learn how to drive, Hop. It'll make things a lot easier, you know?"

"Pretty important step, too," Hop says, nodding. There's a pause before Hop grins over at Mike, one eyebrow quirking. "You have plans to get my daughter alone in a car, Wheeler?"

Mike blushes immediately and begins to stammer. Goddammit, does the man have the power to read minds, or something? "N-no, sir. That – that's not what I – I mean, I didn't ask for – I just–"

Hop laughs and waves a hand. "I'm just giving you a hard time, kid." His face sobers just a little, grin turning a little menacing. "Though, if I ever catch you two in the backseat by Lover's Lake, there'll be hell to pay."

Mike feels the blood drain from his face. Is it possible to drop dead from embarrassment? God, it feels like it might be. "No, I wouldn't – I swear."

Hop gives Mike a look like he doesn't believe a single word Mike's saying and he's grinning in a way that makes Mike want to crawl into a hole and die. "Uh-huh. Well, we'll just see about that."

Mike gulps, feeling like he's blown his chance. "So, uh, does this mean you won't teach me how to drive?"

Hop barks out a laugh. "Oh, I'll teach you, kid, don't worry about that. You'll learn some way or another and, well, if you're going to be driving El around, I want to make sure you learn right." Hop's smile turns mischievous. "Doesn't mean I'm not going to tease you mercilessly the entire time, you understand me? It's one of the few

pieces of power I have left over the two of you and I'm never giving it up."

Mike sighs, but he smiles. "Thanks, Hop."

Hop waves a hand. "Eh, don't worry about it, Mike. I'm glad you could come to me with this. And, really, I'm happy to help."

"So, um," Mike says. "When do we start?"

The answer turns out to be Saturday. 9am, bright and early. Because Jim Hopper's an asshole.

Of course, Mike would rather *die* than call Hop an asshole to his face. But it sure as hell doesn't stop Mike from grumbling as he bikes to the empty parking lot in between Hawkins Middle and Hawkins High.

It's a clear day, sun shining bright across a cloudless sky. There's no snow on the ground – it hasn't been so cold for that – but it's cold enough and Mike's breath comes out in puffs of fog as he bikes the short distance from home to school.

The parking lot is empty when Mike gets there, completely clear of cars. He stops, slotting his bike into a spot on the bike rack, and immediately checks his watch. 2 minutes before 9 o'clock and Hop's not even here yet. Mike grumbles.

Asshole.

He stuffs his hands in his pockets and *waits*, rocking back and forth on his heels. The cold begins to set in as his body cools down from riding over, soaking through his jacket and making him shiver just a bit. After a couple of minutes, Mike graduates from rocking on his heels to bouncing on them, trying to keep his blood moving. It's only a few degrees above freezing.

And Hop's still an asshole.

A lovable asshole, but an asshole nonetheless.

And finally, 10 minutes after 9, Mike watches as Hop drives up, behind the steering wheel of Joyce's car.

Hop pulls up right in front of Mike and Mike knows he's glaring as Hop kills the engine and gets out, forearms leaning against the roof of the car. "Mikey boy!" Hop greets with a grin that Mike can only describe as shit-eating. "Sorry I'm late. Got a little caught up eating a warm breakfast. It's a good feeling, being warm, isn't it?"

Mike clenches his jaw to keep from shivering and glares even harder. "You're enjoying this way too much, you know that, don't you?" he says, suddenly and *very much* regretting asking Hop for his help.

Hop slaps a palm against the roof of the car in exclamation. "Oh, very much so, kiddo," he says. Looks like the grin is going to be a permanent companion for the day. *Great*. Hop comes over to where Mike's standing. "You got your permit on you?"

Mike reaches into the back pocket of his jeans for the folded up piece of paper – his learner's permit. "Right here."

Hop grabs it and unfolds it, scanning over it quickly like he's making sure it's real. "Right," Hop says, handing it back. "I'm assuming you know all the rules of the road?"

"I passed the test with a perfect score," Mike says. "So, I'm hoping." Mike clamps his lips shut right after the smart remark leaves his mouth. *Fuck*.

Hop quirks an eyebrow, grinning so wide the smile turns toothy. "Right, then, in the driver's seat with you, kiddo."

Don't call me 'kiddo', Mike thinks, but doesn't say. Instead, he just continues to glare as he takes his permit back from Hop and goes around to the front seat, frustration sustaining him long enough for him to plop down on the cracked leather.

Then it hits him.

He's in the driver's seat of a car, *behind the steering wheel*.

Is it normal to be this nervous?

Mike manages to close the door, but just sits there and watches as Hop moves around the car before sliding in to the passenger seat. Mike wipes his palms on his jeans and tries to calm the beating of his heart to what feels like no avail. “Alright,” Hop says as he shuts the door. “Here are the keys.” Hop waits until Mike holds out his palm to drop the keys into them. “Ok, what’s the first thing you do?”

Mike curls his fingers around the keys and freezes for a moment. Why does this feel like a trick question? Mike licks his lips and glances over at Hop. “Um...put on my seat belt?”

Hop’s smile turns proud and he nods. “Yes, exactly. So ahead, put on your seat belt.” He waits for Mike to do so. “Now, let’s walk you through preparing to start the ignition....”

Mike listens to Hop’s instructions as he guides Mike through adjusting the seat, checking the position of the mirrors – “Now, those are for checking your surroundings, *not* checking out my daughter,” Hop says with a grin and which makes Mike blush, but he says nothing – and checking both the parking brake and the gear shift. Joyce’s car is an automatic, which means Mike doesn’t have to worry about a clutch and he’s relieved – there’s enough he has to worry about without needing to learn the fancy footwork of driving stick.

Then Mike’s turning the key in the ignition, feeling the car rumble to life beneath his hands. He lets out a breathless laugh and chides himself for it. He’s only started the car – it’s not even out of *park* yet.

“Alright, good, good,” Hop says. “Now, keep your foot on the brake, just in case. And then, keeping one hand on the wheel, release the parking brake-” Mike does so, feeling the parking brake click and thunk as he does so. “-and then put the car into Drive. Ok, hands at 10 and 2 – so no getting frisky while driving – hey, eyes on the road, quit glaring at me – and slowly take your foot off the brake.”

Mike doesn’t know if he wants to put the car back into park and run *far, far away* or if he wants to punch Hop in the mouth, but none of this is *helping*. Still, he has to learn and if this is the price...

Mike slowly takes his foot off the brake and the car starts to roll forward.

“Now, gently, *gently*, put pressure on the accelerator. Don’t want to go too fast, now do you Michael? Take it slow, you have all the time in the world.”

Mike can’t keep his mouth shut any longer. “Are we talking about driving or me dating El?”

Hop barks out a laugh. “Oh, touché, touché. Move us forward, kid.”

Mike shifts his foot and presses down on the accelerator. It’s a bit jerky at first as he figures out what the right amount of pressure is, but then Mike settles in a bit and *holy shit* he’s driving. Sure, he’s only going 5 miles per hour, but *he’s actually driving*.

Hop directs him to take a few slow laps around the parking lot and it’s fairly smooth going for a little bit.

Until the 3rd lap, that is, when Hop breaks the silence of the car. “So, what are your intentions towards my daughter?”

Mike’s reaction is instantaneous: he floors the gas pedal before immediately slamming on the brake a moment later, causing the car to jerk violently, seat belt digging into his chest and shoulder. “Holy shit!” Hop swears as he slams back against his seat, laughing all the while. “Jesus Christ, for El’s sake, I hope your moves are smoother than your driving.”

Mike leans forward and rests his forehead against the curve of the steering wheel. “Oh my god, you’re horrible and I *hate* you.”

A hand ruffles Mike’s hair and he tries to duck, but is unsuccessful. “I’m a goddamn ray of sunshine and you love me.”

Mike rotates his head, forehead still pressed against the steering wheel, to glare at Hop. “Are you going to take this seriously or not?”

Hop lets out a chuckle before he sighs. “Ok, ok, I’m sorry. I’ll try to take this more seriously. I know you’re trying to learn here.”

“Thank you.” Every inch of Mike’s 6’3” frame just flushes with relief.

“You’re very welcome,” Hop says. “Now, why don’t you take a couple more practice laps – a little faster this time – before heading out onto the road?”

Mike does so and, 30 minutes later, he’s driving – like legitimately driving, on the road and *everything*. It’s all going pretty well. But then...

“Have I ever told you about time my dad caught me and Melissa Beckham in the back seat of the cab of his truck?”

“For the sake of my sanity, please don’t.”

“Too bad, kid, you’re hearing it anyway...”

El, I love you, but your father’s a troll.

A soft giggle echoes in the back of Mike’s mind, trailing off in a sigh. *You don’t have to **live** with him.*

Over the next weeks, Hopper teaches Mike how to drive. They spend what feels like hours in the car together, Mike gaining experience behind the wheel, Hopper filling the car with teasing, needling remarks and stories about sowing wild oats and getting up to no good, stories that make Mike blush and groan and wish he were anywhere but in the car with the man who’s torturing him while teaching him how to drive.

Days go by, Mike gets better and better and the day he can get his license gets closer with each passing moment (16, he’ll be *16 years old*, practically an adult – he can’t believe it).

Learning how to drive is not the only new development in Mike’s life, however.

At Hopper’s recommendation to Karen, she starts taking Mike to a

therapist in Indianapolis – a family therapist, specializing in children. “He could use someone to talk to, someone impartial,” is what Jim tells Karen. And, so, in December, two weeks before Christmas, Karen drives Mike out to Indianapolis to see a therapist who came very highly recommended after hours of calls and research.

At first, Mike hates it – hates the drive, hates having to talk about his feelings with a *stranger*. It doesn’t take a genius to see how much Mike doesn’t like it, Karen thinks after the first couple of times. But, somewhere along the line, Mike seems to stop hating it quite so much. Karen doesn’t ask what happens in the sessions that take place every other Friday and the therapist, a Dr. Moore, doesn’t say anything to betray Mike’s confidence.

But Karen’s pretty sure it’s helping. There’s a certain sense of peace that surrounds Mike after he leaves each session, a certain steadiness that makes the cost and the one hour each way drive worth every cent and second.

Most of the time Holly’s with them. While Mike’s in his session, Karen will take Holly to play in the nearby park or for ice cream down the street. But, today, the Friday a week before Mike’s 16th birthday, Holly’s back in Hawkins at a sleepover, so it’s just Mike and Karen on the way back to Hawkins after Mike’s session.

They’re approaching the car, the quiet mostly comfortable, and Karen’s pulling out the keys from her purse when she stops, grinning. “Hey, Mike,” she says from where she’s standing by the rear bumper.

Mike pauses, turning from where he’s reaching for the passenger door. “Yeah, Mom?”

Karen holds up the keys and jingles them. “Want to drive home?”

Mike’s eyes widen, eyebrows shooting up towards his hairline. “Seriously?”

Karen’s grin only widens as she shrugs one shoulder, feeling happier than she’s felt in a while. “Well, you have been practicing with Jim on a regular basis. C’mon, show me what you can do.”

Mike lets out a laugh and smiles, all eagerness. It makes Karen's heart squeeze painfully in her chest from sheer, overwhelming love and happiness. "Thanks, Mom!" He practically runs back towards her to grab the keys and then they're both in the car, Mike behind the wheel, and Karen's giving him directions to get back on the freeway towards home.

"Let me know if you need to switch," Karen says, feeling only a little nervous at the thought of her son driving. But Jim's taught Mike well and Karen can't feel anything but pride, even it's tinged with a little regret. "I don't know if you've driven quite this long in one go, so just say something if you start getting too tired."

Mike doesn't take his eyes from the road, but Karen sees his lips twitch in a small smile. "I will, Mom, don't worry."

Nodding, Karen leans back against the passenger seat. For a few minutes, it's quiet and Karen just admires the view that passes by her window – sun slowly setting behind the horizon, wispy clouds streaking through a multi-colored sky.

'Just talk to him.' Jim's voice echoes in the back of Karen's mind and she takes in a deep breath, remembering the night she came crawling back to beg for her son's forgiveness, to apologize for all the things she'd done to him. It's been getting better, slowly and somewhat painfully. Karen's been trying *every day* and sometimes, she succeeds.

Never hurts to keep trying.

"So, you have any plans for the weekend?" Karen asks.

Mike's gaze flicks over to her for a split second. "Why?"

Karen reaches out, acting more causal than she feels, and taps the knuckle of her forefinger against his shoulder. "Can't a mom be curious about her children?"

Mike breathes out a laugh. "Well, um, Dustin wanted to go see the new Police Academy movie, so we'll all probably go see that."

Karen groans. "They made another one of those?"

Mike grins and shrugs. "Yeah, I know. I'm going to see if there's something else playing. I know El's been wanting to see 'Mannequin', so maybe if the Hawk's still playing it, we'll do that instead."

Karen smiles at mention of her son's girlfriend. "You always do the sweetest things for her, Mike."

Mike blushes, hands fidgeting on the steering wheel. "Well, you know, I love her." The words are said without hesitation, despite the mild embarrassment Karen feels radiating from her son.

"Well, I'm happy for you, Mike," Karen says. "El's a darling girl who loves you very much."

Mike smiles. "Yeah?" He risks another glance over at her.

Karen sighs, happy. "Yeah." The thought of El brings a question to Karen's mind, something she's been wondering for a while but has never been able to find the opportunity to ask. "Do you mind if I ask you something?"

Mike makes a motion that is half shrug, half nod. "Not at all, go for it."

Karen takes in a deep breath, suddenly a little nervous. "How long did it take you to get used to El's abilities?"

Hands jerking a bit at the wheel, Mike lets out a small guffaw. "Oh, um, wow, that's a question." Karen's almost embarrassed for a moment – El's abilities aren't something she and Mike have *ever* talked about, never mind really anything related to Hawkins Lab or, just, *any* of it. But, after a moment, Mike answers. "You know, I don't think you ever get used to it," Mike says, slowly, thoughtfully.

"What do you mean?" Karen asks, genuinely curious now.

Mike huffs out a silent laugh. "I mean...." He pauses, getting comfortable in the driver's seat. "Sometimes, I don't even think about it. Like, my girlfriend can lift objects with her mind and project her thoughts, all normal. But, then, I watch her levitate a book across the room because she's in the middle of something and doesn't want to get up. Or I hear her thoughts in my head, just saying hello, and it

gives me chills. The good kind, but still.” He stops again, letting out a laugh.

“What?” Karen prompts.

“Sorry, just remembering when I found out about her powers,” Mike says. “It was like meeting a real life superhero, like something out of one of my comic books, or something. It was when Will was missing, when I was hiding El in the basement-”

“Still can’t believe you managed that, by the way,” Karen says, gently chiding, more with humor than anything else.

Mike shakes his head. “Believe me, I can’t, either. Wasn’t exactly subtle about it.”

But, Mike had been speaking and Karen interrupted. “You were saying, about finding out about El’s powers?”

“Oh, yeah,” Mike says. “So, we were all up in my room – me, El, Dustin, and Lucas. Lucas wanted to go tell you about her, which I had been trying to do for the past day. But El was scared and, when Lucas tried to open the door to go downstairs, she slammed the door shut and locked it with her mind. I wish I could have seen our faces, the way we all looked at her with shock. We all rushed to apologize, like if we didn’t, she’d strike us down, or something. It was the coolest thing we’d ever seen.”

There’s a wistful tone to Mike’s voice, tinged with the sadness of the memories from that time in his life. But it’s also the most honest and open Karen’s ever heard Mike talk about those days and it feels like a step closer to *something*. “Well, you *were* 12,” Karen says with a small laugh.

“True,” Mike says. “Then she flipped a van over our heads and became, like, legendary.”

Karen smiles. “But that’s not why you love her though, is it?” It’s not a question, but a statement. Karen knows her son well enough to know that.

Mike shakes his head. “No, I still think I’d feel the same about her

even if she didn't have the ability to lift the house with her mind," he says with a chuckle.

Karen's eyes widen. "She can *do* that?"

Mike grins. "Oh, man, let me tell you about the junkyard...."

Three weeks later and one Michael Theodore Wheeler is the proud owner of a driver's license from the State of Indiana. It is a celebratory moment for the Party, a sign of the complete freedom just ahead of them as they race towards becoming adults. The Party marks the occasion by piling into the Wheeler station wagon and driving down to the quarry, Dustin leaning over the bench seat from the backseat to fiddle the radio, squeezing between El and Max who sit up front with Mike, El pressed against his side, Max smacking Dustin to get him to stop. "Dude, you're gonna distract Mike and get us killed when we crash in a fiery explosion of death. *Stop!*"

El ends the argument by shoving Dustin back into his seat with her powers and reaching out for the radio at the same time, flipping it to an oldies station she knows no one else likes but her, causing everyone but Mike to groan loudly.

Once at the quarry, they sit around the car and on the hood, throwing rocks over the edge, radio turned up so they can hear it away from the car.

It is perfect, a moment that could gladly stretch into eternity – all of them happy and together and *free*, buoyant with a wealth of possibility and the future so bright as it beckons them towards it.

(this won't be the first driver's license celebration they will hold, but it will set the pattern for all of them, as one by one, over the next year or so, they all take and pass their driver's tests, the newly licensed teen driving the rest of the party to the quarry. max will be next in only two short months, right after the end of the school year.)

But, with Mike finally getting his driver's license, there is a dream, another freedom, he can finally realize:

Mike Wheeler can finally take El Hopper out on their first, grown up date.

But how to ask her?

Mike Wheeler is a not-so-secret closet romantic, *especially* when it comes to all things El. So he can't just *ask* her.

No, it needs to be special. This is going to be the first *real* date they go on – one without a chaperone or needing someone to drive them or the rest of the Party tagging along, where he'll take her to dinner and maybe a movie and it'll feel like the rest of their lives.

Of course, everything needs to be planned down to minute details. Including how he asks her.

So Mike Wheeler starts planning, starts scheming. He goes through so many scenarios – surprising her with a flower and a card, leaving a note on her pillow in the middle of the night, *so many ideas* – and he eventually settles on a scavenger hunt. For days, he plans it out: where she'll start, the order of the clues, the letters that go with each step of the way, where he'll be waiting for her.

But, of course, here's another not-so-secret about Mike Wheeler: nothing he does ever goes according to plan.

It's been two weeks since Mike got his driver's license and he and El are in his basement. They're sitting on the floor, May sun streaming in through the high windows, papers and books spread across the space between them. They have an English Lit project due the following week – a poster board with an accompanying paper – and

they're still putting together all the materials they need.

Mike rifles through a stack of papers, looking for something he swears he saw 5 minutes ago, but has now disappeared into thin air. He looks up to look over at El, mouth opening to ask if she can pass him the papers by her knee-

-And just freezes as he looks at her.

The light streaming in from the windows hits at just the right angle and it looks like she's *glowing*, strands of honey brown hair shining as the sunlight bounces off of them, the skin of her bare arms warmed by the light. She's wearing jeans and a tank top, its scooped neckline showing off the lines of her collarbones, hair pulled back in a French braid that exposes the sweep of her neck, the curve of her jaw.

She's perfect. And Mike is spellbound.

"Have dinner with me next week."

El looks up at him, one eyebrow quirking up in confusion. "Dinner?"

Fuck, shit, shit, goddammit! All that planning and writing and agonizing and Mike just fucked it all up. And, to top it off, he a) told her, not asked her, like an asshole, and b) he didn't even get the word "date" in there!

*Jesus Christ, can I do **nothing** right?*

"Dinner, like a date." *Ugh, no, try again.* "Not 'like a date', but for real." *Great job, genius.* "Like, just you and me, alone." *Ok, that cleared it up.* "We never spend any time alone." ...*Wait, stop.* "I mean, we're alone right now, but you know what I mean." *Brain, please shut up.* "I meant romantically." *And yet, we keep digging.*

El's looking at him now with both eyebrows arching up into her forehead. "A date, just the two of us, romantically."

Mike groans at the way she parrots his words, like she's not confused, but *skeptical*. He rests his elbows on his folded knees and buries his head in his hands. "I just fucked that up, didn't I?"

El lets out a tiny giggle that does nothing to make Mike remove his head from his hands, but it maybe, *just maybe*, makes him feel the teensiest bit less like an idiot. A miniscule amount. Like, atomically small. He hears the rustle of papers and doesn't even move until he feels a pair of slim hands wrap around his wrists. He looks up as El pulls on his arms, moving them so she can straddle his thighs, her weight resting on his knees. She places his hands at her waist before her arms encircle him, hands clasped behind his neck.

"You're asking me out on a date, aren't you?" El asks, grinning.

Mike blushes. "*Trying* to," he grumbles. He hangs his head, embarrassed, but still looks up at her through his eyelashes. "That was, like, the worst ever, wasn't it?"

El giggles. "Well, not *ever*," she says, voice lilting, teasing.

Mike groans and tries to hang his head even lower, as if he could fold in on himself and just disappear. But one of El's hands slides around from behind his neck, her fingers pressing against the underside of his chin to push his face up. Mike looks at her face, full lips curved in a smile that never fails to make his heart skip a beat. "Mike," she says, gentle, happy.

As if by reflex, Mike smiles back. "El."

El's smile grows even wider. "I would love to go out on a date with you."

Ok, now he's smiling like an idiot. "Yeah?"

El giggles again and leans over to press a quick kiss to his lips. "Yeah. You're my favorite person, Mike, and I love you. Of *course* I want to go on a date with you." El bites her lip, anticipation and curiosity sparkling in her eyes.

Mike just *knows* she has something she wants to ask him. "C'mon, spit it out," he says, unable to stop smiling by this point.

El grins. "Where are you taking me?"

That's the question Mike knew was brewing in there and he chuckles.

“Nuh-uh,” he says, teasing. “It’s a surprise.”

El lets out a small while, pouting. “Well, how do I know what to wear, then?”

Mike leans in and kisses her, lips lingering. “Dress nice. I’m sure you can figure out the rest.”

“You’re no fun,” El says, still pouting. But the rest of her face is full of happiness and Mike can’t resist as he captures her mouth again. El sighs into the kiss, lips parting just enough so Mike can tug on her lower lip with his. They trade soft kisses for a few moments before El pulls back. Mike opens his eyes to see her smiling at him, lips twisted in a mischievous grin. “Can we make out in your car on this date?”

Mike rolls his eyes and lets out a slightly crazed laugh. “You mean, so we can get caught by Hop – who will be stalking us, by the way, if only to scare the crap out of me so he can laugh because he’s a goddamn troll? Yeah, not gonna happen.”

El quirks an eyebrow, determination settling on her face. “Bet I can make you change your mind.”

Mike’s eyebrow mirrors hers and he lets out a snort. “Yeah, good luck with that.” He grins, thought suddenly occurring to him. “You know, speaking of making out....” He trails off, hands shifting to squeeze her hips through the denim of her jeans. He leans over to press a kiss against the smooth column of her neck, teeth scrapping gently against the soft flesh, relishing in the way she gasps and squirms a bit against him. “That blanket fort over there’s looking mighty empty. What do you say we take this over there?”

El tries to look reprimanding, but she’s smiling too broadly for it to be effective. “What about our English project?”

“We can take a break,” Mike says. “I think we’ve earned it.”

El giggles and clambers off of him, pulling Mike to his feet at the same time. “You know what? You’re right,” she says, pulling him towards the blanket fort, careful not to step on any of their papers.

“Of course I’m right,” Mike says, the two of them scrambling into the

cocoon of the fort. “I’m always right.”

El pulls Mike towards her as she lays down so that he’s hovering over her. “Sure you are.”

“I am,” Mike says, holding his weight off of her with his elbows. He leans down and kisses the corner of her jaw, smiling as El gasps and arches against him. “See? Right.”

“Oh, shut up,” El says as she nudges his head so she can reach up and kiss him, her mouth soft and beckoning beneath his. He lets himself sink into the sensation, thought leaving him.

And then there’s no more talking for quite a while, everything forgotten except for each other.

But El doesn’t forget about the bet.

Mike schedules their date for Friday the following week, leaving El with way too many days to figure out what to wear. She tries to extract any small detail she can from Mike, but he’s frustratingly tight-lipped, all smug, secretive smiles and flirty winks and just *insufferable*. He resists all her attempts to weasel the secret out of him – ambushing him with the question while they’re making out, tickle attacks where she holds him down using her powers, sneaking the question casually into conversation while his mind’s half distracted as if he won’t notice. None of it works, though, and El’s so *frustrated*, all anticipation and impatience.

But then she remembers that she bet him she could change his mind about making out in the car during their date. And she can’t help but smile.

Because really, *two can play at this game*.

The bell rings, signaling the end of the day and Mike smiles as he bolts from History class. It's Friday and means there's only a few hours until he gets to pick El up for their date.

But Mike doesn't stop by his locker, not yet. Instead, he reaches out through his connection with El and lets it guide him to her. She's just getting out of French class, but she could be at her locker already and Mike doesn't want to go hunting her down.

His feet carry him through the halls of Hawkins High to just outside the room where El has French class. Mike stands just off to the side and waits.

Moments later, El walks out, books clutched to her chest, her back to Mike as she heads to her locker. Mike smiles and sneaks up behind her, reaching out to wrap his arms around her waist and pull her to him.

El lets out a shocked gasp that turns into a giggle as Mike leans down to press a kiss just below her jaw. "Mike!" she all but shrieks through her laughter, her tone attempting to be reprimanding.

"What?" he says, smiling, as she turns in his arms. "Hi." He's looking down at her now – hair half pulled back, cheeks flushed, smile playing at the corners of her lips.

"Hi," she returns before she stretches up on her tiptoes. Mike takes that as his cue to take her head in his hands, fingers weaving through the curls that have been left to fall down her shoulders, and lean down so he can kiss her. One of her hands lets go of her books to grab at his upper arm, fingers curling into his bicep, and Mike can't help the way he groans when her tongue flicks out to brush against his lips.

"Jesus, can you *not*?"

Mike and El pull away from each other to see Dustin coming up alongside them, leaving the same classroom El just came from. "I would say sorry, but...." Mike trails off.

Dustin rolls his eyes, but he's smiling. "But you're not," Dustin finishes, shaking his head. "You two are pathetic."

"Hey!" El says as the three of them start walking down the halls towards the lockers. "Don't talk about my man that way!"

Mike splutters, laughing and blushing at the same time, while Dustin just laughs. "Your man?" Mike echoes, voice pitching a bit with a strange combination of amusement and incredulity.

El looks up at him, mischief shining in her eyes, and she shrugs. "What, I thought I'd try it out. No good?"

Dustin's laugh comes out as a snort. "Oh, no, it was amazing, El. A+ perfect."

Mike rolls his eyes a bit, but he's still smiling. "It's a little weird," he says, countering Dustin.

"Well," El says, eyebrows pulling up just a bit. "If you tell me what we're doing tonight, I'll never call you that again."

Mike chuckles. "Nuh-uh, nice try." She's been trying to pry the details out of him for where he's taking her on their date, but Mike's been able to resist her methods (though some of them he's really, *really* enjoyed).

El pouts, thwarted again. "I just wanna know what I should wear."

Mike's grinning now. "I'll give you a hint: you're *probably* going to want to wear a sweater."

El glares at him, which causes Dustin to laugh again. "You're very unhelpful, you know that, right?"

"El, it's a *surprise*," Mike reminds her. "I want you to be surprised."

The look El's giving him is doubtful and annoyed as they approach her locker. Dustin waves them off as he continues to his own locker, leaving Mike and El standing as she gathers her things for the weekend. "I'm going to make you regret those words, Michael," she says, lips pulling into a grin.

“Yeah, yeah,” Mike says, reaching out to wrap one of her curls around his finger, tugging on it lightly. “You just keep saying that, and yet, I see no regret.”

But, here’s an *actual* secret about Mike Wheeler, one not even he knows: he’s forgotten about the bet El made him. And she so hasn’t.

Yeah, he’s screwed.

El gets home from school and immediately starts getting ready for her date, *whatever it is*. She spends two hours between the bathroom and her bedroom, doing her hair, her makeup, making herself pretty, picking out the best outfit from the handful she was able to narrow down to.

El stands in front of the mirror and twirls back and forth a bit, inspecting, taking in the image the mirror reflects back at her. She’s wearing a pale green, button-up sundress with a soft white cardigan thrown over her bare shoulders. Her hair’s a little more wild than usual, curls tousled, falling free down her shoulders and back. And her makeup is minimal, but soft, highlighting the curve of her cheekbones, the sweep of her eyelashes. She’s not wearing lipstick, instead opting for clear lip gloss. El expects there’s going to be quite a bit of kissing during this date (especially once she convinces Mike to make out in the car with her), so there’s no point in wasting the lipstick when it won’t last.

And then, at a couple minutes to 6, the doorbell rings and El grins. She takes one last look at herself, a final inspection, and, before she can talk herself out of it, she reaches up to unbutton the top button of her sundress, revealing just the barest shadow of the skin between her breasts. The last thing she does is reach out for the small bottle of perfume on her vanity – a light, citrus scent that’s not too overpowering – and dabs it on her skin strategically: the inside of her wrists, her neck just under the corners of her jaw, the backs of her knees.

Then, with a smile on her face, El leaves her bedroom to head down where she can hear Mike waiting for her.

Get ready to have your socks knocked off, Michael Wheeler.

Mike's hands aren't shaking as he reaches out to ring the doorbell – they're *not*, he swears.

...Well, maybe they are a little. He's just excited – yes, excited. *Not nervous*, not at all.

He can hear the sound of the doorbell ringing from where he's standing outside, and Mike takes a step back, one hand clutching a small bouquet of flowers – three lilies, white and pink, tied together with a thin ribbon – and the other he's trying to keep from running through his hair. Not that there's anything to mess up, since all of Mike's attempts to do something to tame the crazy mop of hair on his head always fail. But, it's the principle of the thing.

Mike spares a quick glance down at what he's wearing – his nicest pair of jeans and a white button-down – and wonders for what feels like the thousandth time if it's ok, *appropriate* to wear on a date.

Well, too late to turn back now.

Then the door opens and Mike's heart leaps into his throat...

...Only to come face to face with Hop, who's grinning like a mad fool. Hop takes a glance down at the flowers Mike's holding and his grin only widens. "Flowers, for me? You shouldn't have, Mike."

Mike levels a flat glare at the older man. "You're still horrible."

"Still sunshine, you mean." Hop stands aside and gestures for Mike to step over the threshold. "She's still getting ready, by the way."

Mike grins, excitement fluttering in his stomach. "Not unexpected," Mike says. "Nancy always took *forever*."

Hop looks at Mike with a raised eyebrow. "I'm going to give you a little tip, a piece of advice, if you will." He pauses for what Mike figures is dramatic effect. "Never, *ever*, tell the woman you're with that it always takes her forever to get ready. Not unless you want to die, that is. And, if that's the case, I'd miss you. I might even shed a couple of tears."

"Nah, you wouldn't get the chance to miss me," Mike shoots back. "I'd just haunt you for the rest of your life."

Whatever Hop is going to say in comeback is lost as another voice enters the room. "Mike!" It's El's voice from the top of the stairs and Mike turns to look her and-

-Jesus, is it, like, her mission to make sure he can never *breathe*?

She's wearing a simple sundress and cardigan, green and white, somehow both innocent and alluring. And her hair – *oh god, her hair* – looks like it does after he's been running his fingers through it and his hands itch with the sudden craving to do just that.

She's smiling at him as she walks down the stairs, all but gliding, and Mike's aware that he's staring at her with his mouth gaping open, but really, she's just so beautiful and he's so lucky and he loves her so much and-

A hand slaps him between the shoulder blades and it's all Mike needs to begin to compose himself. "Pull yourself together, kid," Hop says before he looks over at El. "You look beautiful, sweetheart."

"Thanks, Dad," El says as she reaches the first floor landing.

Hop looks between the both of them before settling his gaze on Mike. "Have her home by 11, Wheeler. And have fun, you two. Don't do anything I would do and, if you do, try not to get caught." Hop smiles and winks before he walks away, leaving both teens blushing, El rolling her eyes.

Mike looks down at El and she's even more breathtaking up close. His heart's pounding in his chest, he loves her so much. "You look beautiful," he says, softly, the words ragged with emotion.

El smiles and looks down, almost demure, before she spots the flowers. “Are those for me?” she asks, cheeks flushing.

There’s a quip on the tip of his tongue, but Mike holds it back. Instead, he nods. “Wanted to do this right,” he says. “You deserve all the flowers in the universe.”

El lets out a soft sigh and reaches for the flowers. Her fingers brush against the top of his hand as she takes the small bouquet from him, her touch creating sparks that dance across his skin, and Mike’s heart skips a beat. “Thank you,” she says. “They’re perfect.” She steps away from him to go to the kitchen to put the flowers in water and Mike just watches as she moves around in the space, her motions efficient and purposeful, graceful all the while.

Then she’s back in front of him, taking her hand in his, and smiling up at him. “Ok, ready.”

Mike grins and pulls her in the direction of the front door. “Great, let’s go.”

They’re outside and walking to his car when El pipes up. “So, where are you taking me?”

Mike lets out a laugh. “You’ll see when we get there,” he says, eyeing her out of the corner of his eye.

El lets out a huff. “Tease.”

“Romantic,” he corrects.

They’re just approaching the car, Mike walking over to the passenger side to open the door for her, when El stops. “Hey, wait a minute,” she says.

Mike turns to her, question of concern on his lips, but he’s cut off as she curls the fingers of one hand in the fabric of his shirt and pulls him down as she leans up, kissing him. It’s a kiss rich with promise, full of love, exciting and thrilling and coming home all at the same time. Mike lets out a small whimper, his hands coming up to slide into her hair, unable to stop himself. He’s overwhelmed by her – the taste of her lips, the softness of her hair, the smell of her perfume.

God, he'd do anything for her as long as she always keeps kissing him like this.

The kiss draws to a slow, lingering end, and El pulls back just enough to look up at him. Her cheeks are flushed, lips glistening, and she's so beautiful Mike feels like he's going to die. "Hi," she says, the words a soft exhale of breath.

Mike smiles, leaning down to press his forehead against her. "Hi," he says back. "C'mon, we should go." He pulls away to open the passenger door, gesturing with a sweep of his arm. "After you."

El smiles. "What a gentleman," she sighs as she slides into the front seat.

Then Mike's closing the door and running around to the other side of the car, climbing in behind the driver's seat. It feels like the beginning of the rest of their lives and Mike wouldn't trade it for *anything*.

El watches as Mike starts the car and she slides over, buckling herself in with the middle seatbelt so she can sit right next to him. He gives her a small smile, a lopsided grin that makes her heart do a funny flip in her chest, and it's the right motivation El needs to begin Operation Car Make Out.

She waits until they're out of the driveway and on the road before she reaches out and places her left hand on his knee, squeezing it *just enough*.

Mike lets out a strangled sound and his whole body jerks, but he manages to keep the car going straight. "El, what are you doing?"

Her face is the perfect picture of innocence; she knows because she can see her reflection in the rearview mirror. "Nothing, just touching you." She narrows her eyes at him. "Why, am I not allowed to touch you?"

“N-no, just...warn me next time, maybe?”

El nods. “Ok,” she says, smiling.

Less than a minute later, El starts drawing small circles on the outside of his thigh with her thumb, pressing hard enough so she knows he can feel it through the denim of his jeans. Mike pulls in a stuttering breath, but says nothing and El has to keep herself from smiling in triumph.

The night seems to fly by in a glorious haze of *love* and *together*. He takes her first to dinner at Giovanni's, a small, quiet Italian restaurant just off the main thoroughfare. The atmosphere is soft and romantic, all dark wood tables and dim candlelight.

Together, Mike and El laugh and talk while they eat, sitting side-by-side in a small booth, practically pressed up against each other. Her hand rests on his thigh, or wraps around his arm, or reaches up to touch his face. He has his arm around her, fingers trailing across her shoulders, touch burning through the fabric of her cardigan, occasionally stopping to play with her hair, leaning over so he can press soft kisses to the top of her hair, her forehead, her temple. All the while, El has her lower leg wrapped around his, her foot caressing his calf, toes occasionally sneaking under the hem of his jeans to brush against his skin.

And before they leave, before he tells them it's time for the next part of their date, Mike leans over and kisses her, tasting like the tiramisu they're sharing, and El almost wants to cry, it's so perfect. His lips linger on hers and El never wants him to stop kissing her like this, like he can't bear it when his mouth isn't pressed against hers, like every time he's loathe to pull away.

Mike pays for their dinner before he's sliding out of the booth, offering her his hand to help her to her feet. “Where are we going next?” El asks.

“You'll see,” is all Mike will say.

What's next, as it turns out, is a movie in the park. A large screen has been set up and they're playing “Grease”, couples and families

lounging on the grass, blankets spread out. Mike brings out a couple of blankets and folding stadium seats, but El spends the movie sitting between Mike's legs, her back against his chest, blanket thrown over the both of them as he wraps his arms around her. Every so often, he'll press a kiss to the side of her neck, or she'll rake her nails over his knee, or she'll twist around to pepper his jaw with soft, nipping kisses that draw gasps and moans from his throat.

Then the movie's over, but it's only 9:30 – there's still an hour and a half before she needs to be home. El grins. "Hey, let's go to the quarry and sit under the stars," she says. "It's a nice night and I'm not ready to go home."

It's a testament to her acting ability (which is pretty lacking) that Mike doesn't even look like he suspects *a thing*. Instead, he smiles at her, laces their fingers together, and nods. "Yeah, that sounds nice."

Together, they head out to the quarry, El pressed against Mike's side again, her hand on his thigh, fingers caressing and drawing patterns on the fabric beneath her touch. Every once in a while, Mike shivers and El knows she's winning (even if he doesn't know there's a game being played right now between the two of them).

Mike parks the car by the edge of the water but, before he can get out of the car to go and grab the blankets, El shifts her hand to grab him by the arm. Using her powers, she unbuckles her seatbelt. "Mike?"

He stops and turns to look back at her, curious concern on his face. "Yeah?"

El smiles and, without saying a word, leans over to kiss him – hard, hot, *needy*. Mike gasps against her mouth, which only gives her the opportunity to reach out with her tongue, brushing it against the length of his lips. He's kissing her back a moment later, mouth meeting her stroke for stroke and El takes it as a sign. She moves, feeling both languid and urgent, shifting her body so she can straddle him, her thighs bracketing his hips.

Mike breaks the kiss, looking at her with a confusion that manages to pierce through the haze of passion that's rapidly taking over the both of them. "El?" His voice sends shivers down El's spine, all low and

raspy and just *so good*.

El links her hands behind Mike's neck, her thumbs caressing the skin just beneath the hairline. "Kiss me, Mike. *Please*."

For a moment, Mike's dumbfounded. His girlfriend – his *very beautiful* girlfriend – is straddling his lap, looking at him like he's the answer to every wish she's ever made, practically *begging* him to kiss her.

Yeah, Mike's not an idiot.

He kisses her, all pent-up passion and overwhelming love, one hand in her hair, the other on her hip, squeezing the curve of her through the thin fabric of her dress.

El's fingers are fiddling with the collar of his shirt, occasionally brushing against the skin of the back of his neck, making him shiver as she kisses him. God, this is good, *so good*. The weight of her pressed against him, the heat of her beneath his touch, the smell and taste and sound of her, all for him – *only* for him.

Their mouths are hot against each other, lips tugging and caressing, tongues brushing. It's like they're drinking each other in, like they're dying of thirst and the only salvation is found in each other's mouths.

El's hands trail down from behind his neck, down his shoulders, and across his chest, fingers playing and plucking at the buttons of his shirt. He can feel it as she slides each button free and Mike groans when her hands slide inside under the open halves of his shirt. Her palms are cool against the warmth of his skin, her touch so soft and gentle it sets him on fire.

Her fingers dance across his ribcage, sweep against the skin of his stomach, trail along the lines of his sternum and collarbone. It's almost more than Mike can take.

He breaks the kiss to look at her, taking pride in the flushed cheeks and swollen lips that are just visible in the darkness that surrounds

them. “El, are we gonna-?”

El shakes her head, knowing the question he’s asking, but sparing him from having to finish it. “No, not tonight,” she says, voice breathy. “I just want to touch you.”

Mike grins, uncertainty fading, leaving love and excitement in its place. “Fair enough,” he says. “As long as I get to return the favor.”

Then it’s all giggles and moans as they resume kissing, El’s elbow hitting the horn, causing it to squawk sharply as she removes her cardigan with Mike’s help, his hands trailing down her shoulders and arms, feeling her skin break out with goosebumps. The next minutes go by in a haze of kisses and gentle caresses, a swarm of love and passion and *forever*.

Somehow, they manage to unbutton the top of El’s dress, the material pushed down to pool around her waist, and there’s a *moment*, where the giggles stop, where Mike pulls his lips from hers to just *look* at her, drinking in the sight of her, gently illuminated by the night around them, the white of her bra a stark contrast to the hue of her skin. He gulps, feeling like he’s been gifted with something he doesn’t deserve. But then he meets her gaze and then they’re kissing again, hands exploring uncharted territories, touching places they’ve only dreamed of touching, hearts pounding, blood pumping hot beneath their skin, drawing sighs and moans and whimpers from *both* of them.

They never want this to end.

But, it has to, eventually.

It’s El who brings them back down to earth, letting out a sigh and reminding them of her curfew. The air around them turns soft and gentle, cocooning them in its loving warmth. Mike helps El right her dress, his fingers doing up the buttons to the sound of her sighs. She returns the favor and he thanks her by brushing his fingers through her hair.

And before she climbs off his lap, she leans in and presses a soft kiss to his lips. “I love you,” she whispers.

"I love you, too," he says. "So much."

But then, she's grinning impishly and Mike can't help but smile. "What?" he asks, laughing.

El bites her lip, pulling the swollen flesh between her teeth. "I win."

Mike's eyebrows draw together. "What?" He's so confused.

"I bet you I could change your mind about making out in the car on our date," she says, punctuating her words with a giggle. "So, I win."

Mike groans, head falling back against the seat, memory rushing in. "Oh my god, you've been holding on to that?"

He jumps a bit at the feel of her lips pressing against his adam's apple, but then her weight's off of him as she slides back to sit down next to him.

(mike tries not to miss the weight of her warmth pressed against him and fails. miserably.)

"You challenged me," El says, poking his cheek with a finger. "Of course I wasn't going to let it go."

Mike picks his head up to look down at her and he's smiling, leaning over to press a quick, hot kiss against her lips. "Well, mission accomplished. We both win, though."

"That's just a bonus," El says as she snuggles against his side. "Really, I'm the winner, here."

Mike huffs a laugh. "If you say so, tiger." That earns him a sharp poke against his ribcage that makes him squirm as he turns the key in the ignition.

He's still laughing as he starts the short drive to her house. And when he drops her off a short while later, leaving her with a good night kiss (though, really, they both know the second they're in their respective beds, El will pull him into the Void so they can fall asleep wrapped around each other like they do every night), Mike realizes that this is just the first of many dates, the first of many nights of just

the two of them.

God, he can't wait.

Notes for the Chapter:

Whee! Hopper's a troll, but kiddo has his driver's license! And Mike and El are going out on dates!

I hope you all enjoyed and I'll see you next time!

Also, come and bug me on tumblr (@fatechica).

24. Jun - Oct 1987

Notes for the Chapter:

So, apparently, all that nonsense about a longer posting cadence?

Yeah, doesn't seem to be true.

Granted, extenuating circumstances (a three day weekend plus too much time on my hands plus my darling EvieSmallwood encouraging me these past couple of days).

But, still...*holy crap*, this just poured out of me. I hope you enjoy it. It's a bit of a departure from the norm, as you'll see not long into the chapter.

I've been calling it "The Outside Looking In" chapter. Hopefully it's apparent *why*.

Enjoy!

Warning: teens making out and getting kinda hot and heavy. Nothing explicit (not going there, folks), but...highly suggestive. In all seriousness, this is as descriptive as I'm going to be with this aspect of their relationship. And this'll be how I go about it the rest of the fic. Take it as you will.

Jun - Oct 1987

The Party blinks and it's summer vacation, sophomore year behind them, high school half over. They're 16 and free (Dustin and Lucas will be 16 by summer's end). It's a summer of county fairs and air-conditioned theaters, of long drives and days spent by the lake.

*(el buys her first bikini, much to mike's delight, and he spends way too much time – also, **not enough**, if you ask him – during those days at the lake sneaking off with her and removing the top of said bikini. el doesn't mind – quite the opposite – as she loves the feel of his hands on her bare*

*skin, exploring and mapping the shape and curve of her, teasing and thrilling – god, so, **so** good. of his bare chest pressed against hers, nothing between them from hip to shoulder, warm and connected and **together**. they always stop before they can go any further, whether it's voluntary or otherwise – no one talks about dustin catching them, **no one** – but they know **one day** it'll happen, one day they'll be ready and it'll be **amazing**.)*

But, their summer's not *entirely* free.

It's also the summer of first jobs. There's suddenly things like gas money that allowances don't entirely cover. Mike gets a job at RadioShack (partially in honor of Bob, partially because it helps get him a discount for A/V Club equipment), El at the public library, Lucas at the comic book store, and Max at Benny's (newly reopened and under new management). On Mike's part, he splits his earnings between three pools: gas money, money to take El out on dates, and money for the small metal tin in his closet (it's not labeled "Engagement Ring Money" only because Michael Wheeler is taking *no risks*).

The summer flies by, really. Nancy and Jonathan come home for a few weeks in between school and their internships and there's a moment of time where it feels like nothing has changed. Really, so much has, but they can pretend that it was just yesterday when the Entire Party congregated at the Hopper-Byers' household (when it was still known as the Hopper house) for regular dinners and movie nights. And, sooner than anyone wants (especially Steve), Nancy and Jonathan are heading back to NYC, and the Party is split apart once more.

And then, it's the mad rush leading up to the beginning of the school year. Another scramble to gather school supplies, learn new schedules, coordinate rides and lunches and just *everything* as they prepare for their junior year of high school. Heading back to school always feels like gearing up for Them against the World. They have friends among their peers, but the Party always feel a little bit separate from everyone else, like their experiences have removed them from the normal worries and stresses of being teenagers.

Mike and El especially keenly feel this, as they watch people around them agonize and worry about "does he like me?" or "god, why won't

she notice me?” and other relationship woes that Mike and El just have never felt. They’ve always been so *sure* about how they feel about each other, even before they had the words to vocalize it.

They don’t know, though, just how much everyone watches them and envies – envies that surety, that conviction, that connection, that *love*.

They don’t know just how legendary they’ve become.

The first day of school dawns like any other.

Except it’s *the first day of school*. Which automatically makes it the *worst*. Megan Shaughnessy groans as her alarm goes off and tries to resist the urge to smother herself with her pillow.

Moments later, a fist bangs at her door – her mother. “Megan, come on! Get up! Don’t want to be late for school!”

Megan pulls the pillow off her face and can’t help but grumble. “No, wouldn’t want that,” she mutters.

But, still she kicks the covers free and drags herself from the warmth of her bed to begin the arduous process of making herself look presentable. And she needs to look *fantastic*. Her breakup with James Moring is still a sore wound that has yet to fully heal and she wants to make him *regret it*, wants to show him just how hot and over him she really is. She hasn’t seen him since the beginning of summer – that’s not enough time to get over someone, is it?

God, she hopes not. She thinks about him, with his dark wavy hair and broad shoulders, with his crooked smiles and the way he held her so close and hopes he’s not over her the same way she’s not over him.

So, Megan spends her time primping and prepping – straightening her long, blonde hair, shaving her legs, doing her makeup in just the right way, picking the perfect back-to-school outfit (a jean mini skirt, a tight, yellow tank top, and low ankle boots should do the trick).

Megan takes one look in the mirror and smiles approvingly. *Yeah, this should do it. James Moring, eat your heart out.*

She still doesn't have her driver's license yet – her mom's a fascist, she *swears* – so Megan's stuck riding the school bus. It's filled with freshman and sophomores and it smells funny and Megan wants to *die*. There's, like, one other junior riding the bus and it's so humiliating. God, she can't *wait* to be able to drive herself.

Megan's out of the bus as fast as she possibly can manage and is back in the unfortunately familiar hallways of Hawkins High before she knows it.

Still, better than being on the bus.

Megan heads to her new locker and sighs. It's so *empty*, like a sad, blank canvass that needs to be filled with pictures of her friends and Rob Lowe.

An arm links through hers as she's loading a few things into her locker and Megan turns to see Katie Halsey, her absolute best friend in the entire universe. "Bestie, I missed you!" Katie cheers as Megan turns, the two girls hugging.

"Katie, you just saw me two days ago," Megan says around a giggle.

Katie tilts her head, looking playfully exasperated, brunette ponytail swinging with the motion. "What, I can't miss my best friend?" Katie takes a step back and gives Megan a once over. "God, you look hot. Trying to make James regret how horribly he treated you?"

"Got it in one," Megan says with a sigh as she grabs a notebook and closes her locker, linking arms with Katie as they head to homeroom.

"He's such a dick," Katie says. "He doesn't deserve you."

"You don't think *anyone* deserves me," Megan says, smiling over at her best friend.

"Well, no one's treated you the way you deserve to be treated. I don't care how cute James is, he steamrolled over your heart and that makes him a dick."

Megan bumps shoulders with Katie as they head into homeroom. "I love you, bestie."

Katie smiles. "Aww, I love you too!"

Unfortunately, though, once homeroom is over, Megan won't see Katie until lunch. So, Megan heads to her locker on her way to French, alone, and tries not to feel too sad about it.

But, before she can even close her locker door, there's a gentle tap on her arm and Megan turns to see El Hopper, smiling so sweetly it almost makes Megan's teeth hurt.

"Ellie!" Megan giggles.

"Hi, Megan!" El greets, reaching out for a light hug.

Megan pulls back and looks at her friend. She's not super close to El Hopper (not many people are), but they're in Dance Club together and have shared a couple of classes throughout the past couple of years, so she considers the girl a friend regardless.

And, once again, Megan's hit with a pang of envy as she looks at El. Perfectly curly hair, falling to the middle of her back in waves that would make Cindy Crawford jealous; tanned skin that speaks to summer days spent outside, nary a freckle in sight; full lips, eyes framed by lush eyelashes, delicate cheekbones. El's wearing a gray, pleated skirt and an adorable lilac V-neck sweater, all of which just shows off the length of her leg, the svelteness of her figure.

Girl looks like a damn model and doesn't even know it. It's really not fair.

But, El's literally the sweetest person on the face of the planet, so Megan can't hold it against her.

"How was your summer?" Megan asks as they start walking to French class, which they've shared since freshman year.

El smiles. "It was good. Spent most of it with my friends, got a job at the library. How was yours?"

Megan shrugs, but she's smiling. "Pretty similar, minus the job at the library." She pauses, grinning. "How's Mike?" It's pointless to ask if El and Mike are still together. *Please*. The world would end before those two broke up.

El blushes and Megan knows she's right on the money. "He's good. Got his driver's license right before school let out last year."

Megan nudges El with her elbow, eyebrows waggling. "Made out in the backseat of his car yet?"

El's blush intensifies, but she grins, looking all too satisfied. "My stepmom says a lady never kisses and tells," El says primly, but the look on her face gives Megan her answer.

"You go, girl," Megan giggles.

El rolls her eyes and bumps her shoulder against Megan's in exasperation, but the moment is dropped as they enter the French classroom and El goes to sit with Lucas Sinclair and Dustin Henderson.

Megan watches, half out of the corner of her eye, as El greet Lucas and Dustin, all easy hugs and gentle teasing. Like they didn't just see each other an hour ago.

"I can't believe they separated us for homeroom this year," Megan hears Dustin say.

"Yeah, this sucks," Lucas says, sounding sad.

El giggles. "That's just because you and Max are separated for homeroom."

"No – well, I mean, that super sucks," Lucas says. "It's just we've been together in homeroom since freshman year."

Dustin scoffs. "Yeah, this sucks demodog ass."

"Dude, can you *not*? I don't need to think about those nasty ass things this early in the morning."

“Hey, Dart was cute!”

“I think Mews would beg to differ.”

“Hey! Leave poor Mews out of this, may he rest in peace.”

“Guys!” El says, getting in the middle of Lucas and Dustin’s bickering. “C’mon, class is about to start.”

“Sorry, El,” both Lucas and Dustin say, properly mollified and Megan can’t help but roll her eyes, even though she’s smiling. They look at El like she’s the best thing ever and their personal superhero. It’s charming and kind of adorable, even though they’re super nerds.

Though, Dustin Henderson’s becoming...not bad looking (he’s cut his hair over the summer, curls cropped shorter to his head, and some of that baby fat is starting to fade, revealing strong features that aren’t unpleasing to look at). And he’s funny and nice, which is more than Megan can say for most of the boys in their grade.

Class starts before Megan can think any further about the potential attractiveness of Dustin Henderson and by the end of it, it’s all but forgotten.

And then, it’s lunch and Megan’s free from classes for 45 blissful minutes. She runs into Linda Daley and Jennifer Hayes, who scoop her up into hugs immediately. Megan’s not the most popular girl, but she’s still really good friends with the Queens of Class of ’89. They get to the lunch table where Katie and Stacey are already sitting and then it’s all laughing and giggling and gossiping as they eat.

But, something draws their attention away from talking about Rebecca Peters’ *horrible* summer tan and it’s this:

The sound of El Hopper’s squealing giggle, followed by, “Mike, put me down!”

Megan and the rest of her table turn to see Mike Wheeler picking El Hopper up, arms wrapped around her waist, twirling the both of them around in the middle of the cafeteria. Only Mike Wheeler is over 6 feet tall, so when he picks El up, it’s *really* up.

But, El doesn't seem to mind given the crazy smile on her face. Mike slows and sets El down, her body sliding against his, both of them smiling like it's been days rather than hours since they last saw each other. El has her arms up around Mike's neck, his hands settling on her waist. And, as Megan and *everyone* watches, El stands on her toes while Mike tangles his fingers with her hair and then they're kissing like it's the only thing their lips were meant to do.

Megan can't help but let out a soft sigh, full of both envy and overwhelming sappiness. Mike Wheeler kisses El Hopper like every woman should be kissed: heart-poundingly confident, blissfully overwhelming, and meltingly hot. He practically hovers over her, engulfing her in his shadow, body bent over her, forcing El to crane her neck to keep kissing him, their mouths slanting against each other.

El's hands are around his wrists, like she needs to hold on to something to keep tethered to gravity, her body curving to mirror his. It's a toe-curling kiss and Megan knows she's never been kissed anywhere close to like what El's experiencing right now. And, god, she hopes to be able to someday.

And it's how Mike kisses El *every day*.

Who knew scrawny Mike Wheeler would grow up to be a phenomenal kisser?

Really, Mike Wheeler is still a *huge* nerd (no pun intended, but *oh my god*, is he tall), but he undeniably loves El Hopper with his entire being. And, Megan has to admit, Mike's turned out to be pretty cute: high cheekbones, well-defined jaw, very kissable lips, artfully messy hair, broad shoulders.

Megan remembers when he had the biggest crush on her back in 5th grade. She also remembers totally blowing him off or taking advantage of his crush by having him do her homework for her. Megan wonders if she'd been nicer, if she'd gotten to know Mike, if that would be her instead of El being kissed like that.

But, Megan watches as El and Mike look at each other, kiss having just drawn to a close. She can see the way they look at each other,

like they each hold the other's entire world in their eyes, like there's nothing they wouldn't do for the other, like they were made for each other.

Megan doesn't believe in soulmates. But Mike Wheeler and El Hopper make it awfully hard not to.

"God, they're so sickeningly all over each other," Linda says.

Jennifer scoffs. "Please, like you wouldn't want to be kissed like *that*."

There's a pause before Linda sighs. "Yeah, I guess. But do they have to rub it in everyone's faces? We *get* it, 'Mike Wheeler and El Hopper 4 ever'. Just...go do that somewhere else."

Megan laughs, turning away from. "I think it's romantic," she says. "Makes me believe there are still good guys out there *somewhere*."

Katie lets out a giggle. "Well, that one's *definitely* spoken for."

Megan turns to look back at Mike and El. They're sitting down now, El across Mike's lap, legs dangling off to one side. He's feeding her a French fry off his plate while El holds his other hand in her lap, playing with his fingers.

Yeah, Mike Wheeler's spoken for.

Now and forever.

Matt Huxley is really, *really* not liking freshman year at Hawkins High. He's already been shoved into his locker *twice* and it's not even the end of the first week.

It was like this at Hawkins Middle, too. So, nothing's looking up *at all*.

Matt, and his twin brother, Sean (*not identical!*) moved to Hawkins

right before 7th grade from Chicago and they've both been kinda miserable ever since. Yeah, neither Huxley brother was *popular* or anything back in Chicago. But they had their own friends and bullies left them mostly alone, even though they're both pretty big nerds.

And it's not like they don't have friends in Hawkins. Well, two friends, really: Bryan Conrad and Owen Ferguson. It's not the same – it's something – but *still*.

They meet when Matt and Sean, a month into their 7th grade year, pester Mr. Clarke to reform the recently disbanded A/V club.

*(they're sad they never got to meet the previous a/v club members. from how mr. clarke talks about them, they sound **awesome**.)*

Bryan and Owen have been best friends forever, but only recently got into electronics, too late to join the previous A/V club. So, when they hear that the new kids, Matt and Sean, want to reform it, they're in.

The four are inseparable from that moment on, banding together against bullies but failing miserably, hiding out at lunch, and just trying to survive the horror that is middle school. And now they're in high school, a chance at a new start.

Or, at least, it was *supposed* to be.

Matt doesn't know why he thought high school would be different, really. It's not like there's not all the same people that were at Hawkins Middle, or anything. So, really, Matt shouldn't be surprised he's still being stuffed into lockers.

In fact, the only hope that Matt has is the existence of Hawkins High's version of A/V Club. According to the list of clubs all freshman were provided with, A/V Club meets on Thursdays, which means Matt, Sean, Bryan, and Owen have to wait the *whole week* to hopefully find a new home, somewhere they belong.

"What do you think the high school version of the club is like?" Bryan asks at lunch on the second day of high school.

They're all sitting outside behind the gymnasium, a quiet place where they can get away from the bullies and just everyone else.

Sean shrugs as he takes a bite of his sandwich. He frowns and looks at Matt. “Dude, I think Mom switched our lunch bags again.”

Matt peels apart his unopened sandwich and sees just plain peanut butter. Which means Sean has his PB&J. “Whoops, here.” There’s a quick swap of lunches before Matt gets back to Bryan’s question. “I dunno. Probably just as nerdy as the middle school version. Just with taller guys, probably.”

Owen grins. “I wonder if there are any girls in A/V Club?”

Sean backhands Owen on the shoulder. “Dude, c’mon. Everyone knows girls aren’t *interested* in A/V Club.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Owen says with a sigh, deflating a bit. “Still, would be cool if there *were*.”

Matt can’t help but agree. But he’s also a realist and, well...

Pigs might fly before a girl joins A/V Club.

Still, it’s exciting, joining A/V Club. Matt’s hoping he can at least make some friends with the upperclassmen, hoping for some sense of *belonging*.

So, when Thursday rolls around, Matt wakes up *nervous*. He spends way too much time trying to figure out what to wear, wanting to look *cool* for A/V Club, wanting to impress them...or at least show them he belongs, that he can be cool, too.

He ends up settling on blue jeans and his favorite t-shirt, black with the title logo for Episode VI printed in red on the front.

God, he hopes this is good enough.

Sean’s not much better, wearing a dark blue shirt with the NASA logo on it. The brothers exchange knowing, embarrassed smiles as they eat breakfast, but say nothing otherwise.

Until, that is, they get to school and see what Owen is wearing: a short-sleeve button up shirt and a *freaking* bow-tie.

“Dude, what the hell?” Sean says.

Owen frowns. “What? What’s wrong?”

“You look like freaking *Pointdexter*, that’s what,” Matt says, groaning, feeling all of his dreams dashed.

“Well, I wanted to make a good impression,” Owen says, getting his hackles up.

Bryan laughs. “Well, you’ll make *an* impression.”

Bryan needles Owen the rest of the day until he takes the bow tie off, but the button up shirt really isn’t much better without it and Matt wants to crawl into a hole and die.

Man, he *should* have coordinated outfits with the others yesterday.

Eventually, the last bell of the day rings and the four gather just around the corner from the A/V Club room, having a bit of a huddle before they go in.

“Right, are we ready?” Matt asks, looking around at the suddenly pale faces. Great, they all look how he’s feeling: nervous as fuck.

Bryan shrugs, trying to go for nonchalant, but ending up looking a bit twitchy instead. “It’s now or never, right?”

Sean gulps. “Yeah, let’s go. We don’t want to be too late, or anything.”

Matt nods. “Right, I’ll lead the way.” He takes a deep breath and turns, walking around the corner with more confidence than he feels, hearing the footsteps of his brother and friends behind him. He stops in front of the closed door to the A/V room and, for a moment, just *listens*.

Through the thick, wooden door, Matt can hear the sound of talking – voices ranging in pitch, but all male – punctuated by loud laughter. God, Matt wants to be part of that so bad, he can taste it.

So, Matt reaches out for the doorknob, give it a twist-

-And the door's locked. *Great.*

Matt pulls in another deep breath, feeling the eyes of the others behind him, and knocks, knuckles rapping against the door 3 times, as loud as he can make it.

From the other side of the door, the voices mostly stop, but one calls out. "Oh, very funny," a voice calls out, muffled but no less amused. "Making me get up to open the door when you can unlock it with your-" The voice gets clearer and clearer as the source approaches the door, cutting off when it opens and looks out into the hallway.

Matt looks up to see a guy with short, curly hair, looking down at them with confusion. "Uh, can I help you? Are you lost?"

Matt chews on his lower lip and takes a glance back at the others, Sean gesturing him to get on with it. Matt looks back up at the guy, who's got to be at least 6 inches taller than him – broad shoulders, large arms, wearing an unbuttoned short sleeve flannel shirt over a white undershirt – and Matt gulps. "Um, we're here for A/V Club?"

There's a moment, a long quiet moment where the guy just stares down at Matt and his friends, face blank, like he doesn't know what to make of the situation. God, Matt just wants the floor to eat him up right here and now.

But, then, the guy's face breaks out into a toothy grin and he lets out a laugh that's more of a guffaw than anything else. "Hey guys!" he says, turning around him to look into the room that's blocked from Matt's sight by his body. "We've got baby nerds who want to join A/V Club!"

There's a bit of scrambling Matt can hear from inside the room and then another voice, a little higher pitched, chimes in. "Well, Dustin, stop blocking the door and let them in." The door opens wider and another face pops into view – straight hair cropped short, medium brown, a wide smile on his face – and Matt feels himself able to breathe again. "Hi, ignore Dustin over here. I'm Will, come on in." Will pushes Dustin aside – like, literally pushes, shoving the bigger boy and everything, causing Dustin to stumble while he's laughing – and gestures for Matt and the others to come inside.

“Um, thanks,” Matt says, stepping in and taking count of the occupants.

“So, the bridge troll who answered the door is Dustin, our treasurer,” Will says, to the sound of Dustin’s offended “Hey!” Will gestures where an African-American boy – hair shaved close on the side of his head, grown out on top, the shadow of facial hair visible even through the color of his skin – is sitting across a backwards chair, broad forearms resting against the backrest, white t-shirt tight where it pulls against his biceps. “That’s Lucas, club secretary – say hi, Lucas.”

Lucas is giving them a slightly confused look, but he waves, a simple lift of his hand, fingers outstretched. “Hey,” he says, voice deep in a way that Matt envies.

“And the tall, pasty thing in the other chair is Mike, club president.”

Mike rolls his eyes. “I’m not pasty, I’m just pale and try not to tan. It’s not like I *need* more freckles, anyway.” Matt takes a careful look at the club president (which is the role Matt filled in the Hawkins Middle version, so Matt feels like he needs to take the measure of this current president *just because*). Mike’s got one leg pulled up, bent leg resting against the edge of the table so that his jean-covered knee is visible, one hand on the table, the other on his knee, long fingers drumming absently. His dark hair is messy like he’s run his fingers through it one too many times, and his features are all angles – sharp cheekbones, strong jaw, defined nose. He looks like one of those guys who would hang out in coffee shops all day (from what Matt can gather from the movies his mom watches), like one of those guys that girls would think is “deep” and “sensitive”. God, Matt wants to grow up to look like that someday.

And he also has, like, a million freckles.

Dustin laughs. “You know there is someone who wouldn’t mind you having *more* freckles, right?”

Mike blushes just a bit, but rolls his eyes again before looking over at Matt. “So, what’re your names?”

Matt practically falls over to introduce himself and the others. “Well, I’m Matt. This is my brother Sean. And this is Bryan. And Owen.” A pause. “We’re freshman.”

Lucas lets out a small laugh, but it’s not unkind. “Yeah, we figured.”

“We’re juniors,” Will says. “But we remember what it’s like, being new to high school. Why don’t you guys have a seat?”

Matt eyes the empty chairs in the room, of which there are two. “Um, is there somewhere we can get more chairs?”

“Oh, shit,” Mike says. “Hold on, there’s a few more in the corner. Let me grab them.” And Mike stands up. And up. And *up*. Matt swallows. *Holy shit*. Mike is, like, the tallest person Matt’s ever seen. It’s especially apparent in the small room. Matt feels tiny as he stands there, all 5’1”, keenly aware that his promised growth spurt hasn’t kicked in yet, and wishes *so bad* to be as tall as Mike one day.

There must be something on Matt (and everyone else’s faces) that gives away his thoughts, because Dustin laughs and says, “Yeah, Mike’s really tall. We use him to get things down from the *very* top shelf.”

“Fuck you, Henderson,” Mike’s muffled voice sounds out from behind a shelving unit, and he comes out a few seconds later with a couple more chairs. “Alright, we only have two more chairs, so we’ll have to figure something out.”

“There are more people coming?” Sean asks as they settle in, but none of the older boys seem to have heard.

“Hey, where are they, anyway?” Lucas asks.

“Getting out of gym,” Will says.

“Ugh, that sucks,” Dustin says, “Gym in the *afternoon*. What a horrible invention.”

“Must suck for you peons who have to take gym,” Mike says, grinning.

Dustin gives Mike the finger. "Well, we can't all be on the Varsity Swim team, now can we?"

Owen gasps. "You do *sports*?" Even Matt's a little awed. He's never heard of anyone doing A/V Club and sports *at the same time*. Is that even possible?

Mike sighs. "No, I do individual athletics. Trust me, you don't want me anywhere near a sport."

"God, now I'm having flashbacks to kickball back in middle school," Lucas says, snickering.

"Yeah, yeah, Mr. Star Pitcher," Mike says. "Laugh it up."

Lucas grins. "You're just envious I can throw a ball."

"Please," Mike scoffs. "Like I'd be envious of *that*."

There's an easy camaraderie between the older guys that Matt just *envies*. And they're all so *confident*, like they know who they are and where they belong and it doesn't matter that they're nerds and in A/V Club and it's so *not fair*. Matt needs to know how to get to there from where he is because he wants that self-assurance, wants that confidence. How does he get there?

Bryan pipes up, interrupting the moment. "Um, so do you guys do anything A/V Club related or do you just talk shit about each other?"

A silence comes over the room and, for a moment, Matt's afraid they're going to get thrown out. But the older guys all laugh. "Nice one, kid," Will says.

"Yeah, baby nerds got some chutzpah," Dustin says. "Alright, since you're new here, let's lay down the ground rules. This is your audition to joining our Party as the next generation, so don't fuck it up."

Matt nods, eager to absorb whatever knowledge these juniors have to bestow. "We're ready."

Dustin grins. "Alright, the first rule is friends don't lie...."

Dustin goes over a few of the rules, stuff about drawing first blood and providing assistance and none of it has to do with A/V club, but Matt doesn't care because he finally feels like he's found somewhere he belongs and he and his friends have been welcomed into this group of *high school juniors* and oh god, is this what it feels like to be cool?

And then the door opens behind them, interrupting Dustin in the middle of reciting Rule #4. Matt and his friends turn to look-

-And their jaws immediately drop.

"Hey, sorry we're late." The speaker is a girl – no, a *woman* – with hair like fire and oozing cocky confidence. She's wearing a tight t-shirt and loose jeans which hang just so, showing off the thin strip of skin between the hem of her shirt and the top of her jeans, carrying a skateboard under one arm like she does it every day. She's radiant and *so pretty* and Matt feels his heart begin to beat faster. "Getting out gym took forever."

"Well, if you just accepted that the hand dryer wasn't going to dry your hair, we wouldn't be so late." Matt looks over at the other speaker – also a woman – and he suddenly can't breathe. She's the most beautiful person Matt's ever seen – long, dark curly hair, half pulled back away from her face, soft skin, lips that look like they want to be kissed. She's wearing a tank top and a short jean skirt and Matt feels like he's blushing as he looks at her.

The redhead stops short, taking in the occupancy of the room. "Dude, when did A/V Club get fresh blood?"

The other woman – the angel – elbows her friend. "Max, stop." She turns to the room and smiles and Matt's in love. *God, he would do anything for her as long as she keeps smiling at them like that.* "Hi, welcome to A/V Club."

Dustin groans. "El, you can't smile at them like that. They're little freshman nerd boys. They don't know what to do when a pretty girl smiles at them."

El – *god, even her name's perfect* – just rolls her eyes. "Ok, Dustin. I'm

just trying to be nice.”

Max walks over to where Lucas is and drops off her stuff. “Well, I came by to say I can’t stay. I have detention.”

Lucas grabs Max’s hand (oh god, are they dating? Holy shit, this is too much). “What happened?” he asks, looking up at Max with concern.

But, Max is smiling, like she’s proud. “Oh, I bitched out Tracy Holtzman for making fun of a freshman girl. Just because she’s a junior doesn’t mean she gets to be a bitch to everyone who she thinks is ‘beneath her’.” The words are emphasized with a roll of her eyes and air quotes. “So, I gotta go sit and stare at the wall for the next 45 minutes. Catch you losers later.” Max leans over and presses a quick kiss to Lucas’ lips before she’s off.

“Hey, you hang out with us losers. What does that make you?” Dustin calls out.

“A fucking saint!” Max calls back over her shoulder.

Everyone laughs, but Matt’s attention is back on the other woman – *El* – as she navigates her way around the room, all grace and swaying hips and *oh my god*-

-And immediately goes to sit in Mike’s lap.

Mike’s arms open as she approaches and he wraps them around her waist as she settles in. “Hi,” he says, like no one else is in the room.

El brings up a hand to trace her fingers along Mike’s cheek. “Hi,” she whispers back. And then they’re kissing – mouths open, trading heavy kisses – and every fiber of Matt’s being explodes with a strange combination of envy, jealousy, and awe. Because if Mike – who, as president of A/V Club, is just as much of a nerd as Matt is – can get a girlfriend as mind-blowingly beautiful as El, then maybe there’s hope for him yet. But, also, El’s so beautiful and Matt can’t help but wish she was kissing him like she’s kissing Mike.

“God, you two, there are impressionable youths in the room,” Dustin says, sounding exaggeratedly scandalized.

“You know it’s not going to stop them,” Will says.

Over on the other side of the room, Lucas is scooting away from where Mike and El are still kissing – his hand is in her hair, now, and Matt wonders if it’s as soft as it looks (and, from the way El’s leaning against Mike, she *really* likes what Mike is doing).

Dustin rolls his eyes and turns back to Matt and his group. “Alright, amended Rule #4: Mike and El literally cannot keep their hands off each other. So you have the right to douse them with ice water if it gets too hot in here.”

That causes Mike and El to break apart (though El stubbornly remains on Mike’s lap) and turn to look at the rest of the room. “Hey, we’re not *that* bad.”

There’s a look that is exchanged between Will, Lucas, and Dustin – incredulity, amusement, exasperation – before they look back at Mike and El. “Please,” Lucas says. “How many times have we caught you two making out in here?”

Dustin snorts. “Let’s not forget the time I walked in here and *neither* of you were wearing a shirt. Remind me, Michael, where were your hands, again? Oh, that’s right, on your girlfriend’s b-”

“Ah, ah, nope!” Will calls out, interrupting Dustin. “Dude, I don’t need to hear where Mike has been touching my sister.” He looks over at Mike and El. “No offense, you guys. But I would like to be able to sleep at night.”

“None taken, Byers,” Mike says with a shrug, looking completely unembarrassed in a way that’s just shocking to Matt.

(Then again, if Matt got to make out with El, would he be embarrassed? No, he’d shout it from the rooftops, is what he’d do.)

El rolls her eyes. “It’s like you guys haven’t heard of *knocking*.”

Dustin snorts. “Please, the only ‘knocking’ you know about is the knocking boots variety.”

El’s face contorts with annoyance. “Hey, we haven’t had s-”

Mike brings up a hand to clap it over El's mouth. "Ok, honey," he says, tone tight and teasing at the same time. "We don't have to tell everyone *all* the details of our relationship, ok?"

El pulls Mike's hand away from her mouth, looking not at all sheepish, and gives him a wry smile. "Don't call me 'honey'."

Mike grins. "Muffin?"

"Nope."

"Babe?"

El shudders. "Ugh, god, no."

"How about Princess?"

"Michael Wheeler..." El narrows her eyes at Mike.

Mike's grin stretches to shit-eating proportions. "Schmoopy bear?"

El's shaking her head now. "If you do one more..."

"Ok, ok, I'm stopping now..." Mike pauses, shoulders shaking with laughter. "Baby Cakes."

"Alright, that's it." El immediately launches into action, hands dancing up and down Mike's sides as she tickles him. Mike explodes with laughter, trying to squirm away from her assault. All it does, though, is cause him to overbalance in the chair, sending them both to the floor in a symphony of laughter and shocked gasps.

Will groans. "You two are ridiculous," he says while Lucas and Dustin laugh.

Matt looks around to his brother and his friends and they're all grinning just like he is. *God, this is going to be so awesome.*

They get to make friends with some of the coolest nerds Matt's ever met. And if Matt gets to be in the same room as El Hopper once a week, well, that's just a bonus.

Even if she's in love with Mike Wheeler.

That's ok.

No one's perfect.

(el always has soft smiles and kind words for matt and the other newcomers. it only takes a couple of weeks for all four freshmen to essentially pledge their undying devotion to el hopper and, even though the crush matt has on her will fade over the years, he'll always be grateful for her welcoming acceptance and quick wit. she will always be the woman he measures all others against. and, one day, when matt runs into her and mike – the two of them married for a year – hand in hand with his own girlfriend, el will smile and greet her, too, like she's a long lost family member. and matt will love her all the more.)

It only takes two weeks into Mike and El's freshman year of high school for everyone to realize one thing: no one wants to be the person with their locker on either side of Mike or El's.

Because, on any given day, you just never know if access to your locker is going to be blocked by the combined body weight of Mike Wheeler and El Hopper as they attempt – once again – to merge into one schmoopy, love-sick being.

It's even worse, however, if the person who shares a locker wall with El Hopper *also* has a stupid crush on Mike Wheeler.

Which is where Effie Johnson is today.

On the first day of junior year, when Effie gets to her new locker and sees El standing in front of the locker next to it, door open as she puts away some of her things, Effie can't help but groan.

"Hi, Effie," El says when she approaches, all soft smiles and stupidly perfect hair. It would be so easy to hate El Hopper if she weren't so goddamn nice. Like, *genuinely* nice.

Effie smiles. “Hey, El. Have a good summer?”

“Yeah,” El says. “You?”

Effie nods. “Not too bad,” she says. She doesn’t ask about Mike Wheeler – *can’t*, actually. Not without blushing or feeling the worst sort of jealousy. “Kinda wish school didn’t have to start up again.”

El smiles – more like grins, actually – and giggles. “Yeah, I know what you mean.”

They go their separate ways – off to two different homerooms. And, though Effie sees Mike and El still attached at the hip (god, she sees that kiss in the cafeteria on the first day of junior year and her stomach just *drops*, imagining what it must be like to be kissed that way *by him*, envying El all the while), she goes the first couple of weeks without catching them making out in front of her locker.

But that luck won’t hold out forever.

And, true to form, a few weeks into school, it happens.

It’s a Wednesday, right before lunch, and Effie’s heading to her locker to drop off her things and grab the lunch her mom packed for her that morning. She sees them when she rounds the corner and Effie wants to cry.

El’s locker is open and both her and Mike are standing next to it, El with her back pressed against Effie’s locker while Mike leans over her. She’s grinning up at him, all coy and playful. Mike’s staring back down at her, forearm leaning against the metal above El’s head, his head ducking beneath his arm, smiling down at El like she hung the moon *and* the sun *and* the stars in the sky. He’s talking to her, lips moving, but Effie can’t hear the words he’s saying.

She doesn’t need to in order to imagine what he’s probably saying: *you’re so beautiful, I love you, stay with me forever.*

Effie sighs, looking at Mike, drinking in the sight of him even while he’s enamored with another girl. It doesn’t matter that he’s wearing the dorkiest sweater she’s ever seen (hand-knit, zig-zagging cream stripes on a navy background). He’s just *so handsome*, all wind-swept

hair and long, elegant fingers; lean frame toned from hours of swim practice, all strong arms and long legs; perfect cheekbones and kissable lips; dark eyes that she wants to fall into and never come out of.

But he's also hopelessly and endlessly in love with El, who's just as hopelessly and endlessly in love with him in return.

And then Mike leans down to kiss El and Effie feels like *dying*.

Mike kisses El like he can never get enough, like he'd be content to drink from her lips for the rest of his days. His hand, the one not resting above his head, reaches out to tuck a lock of hair behind El's ear before trailing down over her shoulder and down her back, fingers dancing along her spine, and finally tucking themselves beneath the hem of her sweater. Effie can see the sharp intake of breath El pulls in at the feel of Mike's hand under her sweater and Effie knows it'd be the same for her if she were in El's place.

El stands up on her tiptoes, arching into the curve of Mike's body, chests pressing against each other's until there's no space between them, and the moment turns from *sweet* to *hot* in an instant, their mouths opening against each other, devouring, *hungry*.

And, despite the fact that Effie's dying on the inside, she has to roll her eyes when her stomach gives a loud growl. Because her lunch is behind the metal door that Mike has El pressed up against and *really*, they're at school. Can't they make out somewhere else?

So, it's with a weird combination of feelings – exasperation, envy, sadness – that Effie approaches the impassioned couple and clears her throat. *Loudly*.

To their credit, Mike and El stop kissing and look over in Effie's direction. They make no further move apart, however, like any physical distance between them is just unacceptable.

"Sorry to interrupt," Effie says. "But, if you don't mind, I'd like to get into my locker."

Mike's eyes widen and he blushes a bit. "Oh, sorry Effie."

El smiles as she pushes Mike away, hands on his chest, and steps away from her locker. “Yeah, we’re sorry. Just got caught up.”

Effie smiles – like she said, it’s impossible to hate El Hopper – and shrugs. “It’s ok. It’s just who you two are.” And, it’s true. Even if Effie knows there’s literally no chance of her crush being reciprocated or anything, even if that fact kind of breaks her heart, it’s still heartening that a love like Mike and El’s can exist in the world. It gives her hope of finding something like it someday.

For the moment, though, she has to stand next to Mike and El as they talk in low tones about their date for the weekend and Effie can’t say that it doesn’t hurt.

(she’ll get over her crush someday. and when she meets someone who loves her like she deserves, who she’s head over heels for, she’ll think back occasionally on the crush she had on mike wheeler and hope, with all her heart, that he’s still with el hopper, hopes that they’re still just as happy and in love as that day during junior year.)

(spoiler alert: he is)

It sucks being the new kid. Sucks even more being the new kid one month into the school year.

Brodie Redding is resigned to his fate, though. Brought out to Hawkins from Philadelphia because of a sudden transfer of his dad’s job is not something Brodie can reasonably argue with.

It still sucks, though. Leaving all his friends behind – leaving behind *everything* he’s ever known – and having to pick up and start again is *not* how Brodie thought his junior year of high school was gonna go.

At least, if he had to move, he moved before Basketball season started so he can still try out for the team. He was going to be Varsity back in Philly and, well, hopefully he can still get on Varsity here in Hawkins.

Brodie's first day at Hawkins High falls on a Tuesday and that's, like, *the worst*. At least, if he'd started on Monday, it would have been a little less awkward. But starting mid-week on top of starting mid-year? Just horrible.

Brodie carefully navigates his way through Hawkins in his old, beat up Ford 4-Door. Hawkins isn't big – not compared to Philly – but it's a little windier, less straight roadways and more hills and curves. Brodie's not sure how much he likes it, but he's gonna have to get used to it.

He finds the high school eventually and parks his car in the student lot before heading in, taking a couple of false turns before ending up at the front office.

Then, he's being shoved into Homeroom, every eye turned on the New Kid, and Brodie just wants to fucking hightail it back to Philly. It's a small town where everyone knows *everyone* and Brodie stands out like a sore thumb.

Great. Fucking fantastic.

The teacher directs Brodie to an empty chair in the back of the classroom and he slinks his way over there, backpack sliding down to land with a heavy thump before heaving himself into his seat.

He makes it through Homeroom, though, and when he stands up, there's a tap on his arm.

"Hey, man," another guy says when Brodie turns. Tall, short blond hair, looks like he probably plays sports. "I'm Alex. Sorry about being the New Kid."

Brodie smiles, feeling sardonic. "Brodie," he introduces himself, sticking out his hand for Alex to shake. "And, yeah, it sucks. It sucks *a lot*."

"So, where you from?" Alex asks as they make their way out of the classroom. By the time Brodie's in his next class (Algebra II, god, someone kill him now), he discovers that Alex is on the Football team, dreams of playing for UI, and offers Brodie a spot at their lunch

table.

Brodie smiles and thanks Alex before the other kid goes on his way. *Well, maybe this won't be so bad.*

A few hours later and Brodie's following the flow of the masses on their way to the cafeteria and, after he grabs his tray of uninspiring mystery meat, it only takes him a couple of moments to spot Alex where he's sitting with some of the other Football players.

Alex spots him and waves him over. "Hey, man, you made it." And then it's a flurry of introductions as Brodie sits down. He knows it'll take some time before he remembers everyone's name, but the guys all seem pretty cool and fairly welcoming, so maybe this really won't be so bad.

And then, 5 minutes into lunch, Brodie sees *her*.

She's walking – no, *gliding* – across the cafeteria. And she is pretty, hot, beautiful, *fucking gorgeous* – all of the above, really.

She's wearing tight jeans and an equally tight sweater, showing off every delectable curve, hips swaying as she walks. Her wavy hair is pulled back in a high ponytail, which swings enticingly in time with her steps.

And her *face* – Jesus, Brodie wants to write fucking poems about it. Soft skin, wide, doe eyes, sweet, kissable lips.

Holy shit.

"Dude, don't even think about it."

It's Alex's voice and Brodie manages to tear his gaze away from the absolute angel who's graced the cafeteria with her presence. "What?" Brodie knows he sounds dazed and, god, he feels it.

"El Hopper, the girl you're drooling over, the girl practically every red-blooded male in Hawkins High drools over? Yeah, it's not gonna happen. Believe me," Alex says with a roll of his eyes and a dry smile.

Out of the corner of his eye, Brodie watches as El – *oh god, what a*

name – stops by a table, smiling and laughing with the table's occupants. "Why? What do you mean?"

There's a round of chuckles from the guys sitting around Brodie. "Well, one, she's the daughter of the police chief. And two, that's why," another guy – Josh? – says, pointing in the direction El came from.

Brodie turns to see one of the tallest guys he's ever seen strolling into the cafeteria, looking like the biggest fucking nerd on the face of the planet – freckles, dorky sweater, *the works*.

But he heads straight for El, swiftly moving in to wrap his arms around her waist, leaning over to kiss her neck. El explodes with giggles, the sound filling the cafeteria, and Brodie wishes it was *him* making her make that noise.

And, as Brodie watches, stomach sinking, El turns around in the nerd's arms, all exuberant smiles, and then they're kissing, him leaning over her, her reaching up, completely and utterly engulfed in the other.

"That's Mike Wheeler, biggest fucking nerd on the face of the planet," Alex says.

"Dude's also a pretty good swimmer, though," one of the other guys says. "Made Varsity last year."

Alex rolls his eyes. "Whatever, still a big fucking nerd. And he's been with El Hopper since the first day of freshman year."

Brodie looks at Alex – has to practically rip his eyes away from where Mike and El are trying to devour each other in the middle of the cafeteria. "What?"

"Yeah, like, so El Hopper moved to Hawkins the summer before high school," Alex says in a way that makes Brodie think this is a story that's been told more than once. "And Mike Wheeler just kissed her out of nowhere at the end of the first day of school. Got to give the nerd credit: that took balls."

"Especially since her dad's the police chief," Josh says with a grin.

“They’ve been together ever since,” Alex says. “And they are all over each other all the fucking time. There’s a running bet on when they’re gonna get caught doing it on school property. It’s literally only a matter of time.” Alex spares a glance over at the still kissing couple. “So, yeah, as long as Mike Wheeler exists, El Hopper has eyes for no one else. So you can look and admire – believe me, we *all* do – but good fucking luck on the rest of it.”

Brodie looks back over at Mike and El and sighs, just a little, at how monumentally un-fucking-fair it is.

Some guys have all the fucking luck. Just never expected it to be a fucking nerd.

*(irony of ironies, it'll be brodie who'll catch mike and el having sex on school property – april of senior year, in the bio lab, 3 hours after school has ended. it isn't the first time they have sex on school property (not that brodie knows this), just the first time they get **caught**. it wins him nothing but images he can't unsee, sounds he can't unhear, and a flash of notoriety that makes absolutely **none** if it worth it.)*

The clock strikes 5pm and Scott Clarke can't help the sigh of relief that escapes him as the staff meeting *finally* ends.

It's not that Scott doesn't like his colleagues – he *does*. They're all dedicated teachers, some more than others (*looking at you, Agnes*, who's two years away from retirement and getting more tired by the day).

But, Scott really *loathes* staff meetings. It seems like it's nothing but an hour and a half of bickering and complaining about *everything* and Scott always leaves them feeling drained.

Besides, it doesn't help that he knows Jen is waiting for him at home – his fiancée, *god he can't believe he pulled that off* – and the wait to join her is all but unbearable.

But, at the end of the day, Scott loves his job. He loves *teaching*. Every day, he gets to engage with these growing young minds, gets to enrich them with knowledge and the love of learning. Sure, most of them don't come away with any of that – Scott knows, he remembers being a kid, even if it was many years ago. But the ones who do catch the spark, that love for learning? Those are the students who make it all worthwhile.

And it's as Scott is heading out to his car, heading out to the lot between Hawkins High and Hawkins Middle, that he spots one of those very students. Though he's not a student of Scott's any more, Scott easily recognizes Mike Wheeler. It's not hard – lanky limbs, mop of dark hair, face full of freckles. Scott sees him around town often enough, usually at a distance and most often with all his friends. Scott's always amazed at how big those boys are getting, Mike and Lucas in particular having just shot up over the past couple of years. And Dustin Henderson comes by on a regular basis, sometimes with Mike in tow. So, seeing Mike around Hawkins is not an unusual occurrence.

But, this is not a context in which Scott is used to seeing Mike.

Logically, Scott knows Mike is growing up. He must be, god, 16 by now? Almost 17? Still, no matter how old Mike Wheeler gets, Scott will always remember him as the small 11-year old who first walked into 6th grade science class.

Which makes it even more...not awkward, but surprising? Striking? To see Mike Wheeler very clearly making out with who Scott can only assume is his girlfriend.

Mike's leaning against the hood of a station wagon – his car, Scott's assuming, backed into a spot only a couple away from where Scott's car is parked. He's bundled up against the late October chill that's enveloped Hawkins, windbreaker over a sweater, blue jeans encasing long legs. Those legs are currently outstretched in front of him and, standing between them, is a pretty brunette wearing a pink, puffy jacket, hair spilling down her shoulders.

Mike has one hand on her hip, the other in her hair as they trade slow, soft kisses in the dying light of the day. She's leaning against

him, hands braced on Mike's chest, the two of them looking all for the world like there's nowhere else they'd rather be.

Scott just takes a moment to look at them – it's not like they're breaking any rules, or anything, so Scott doesn't feel the immediate need to butt in. But it's heartening to see Mike grown up, to see him so comfortable with a girl he very clearly likes.

It's not that Scott had worried about Mike in middle school...well, much, at any rate. He knows the boy had been bullied relentlessly along with the rest of his friends, and that Scott hadn't been able to do much about it since it mostly happened away from the eyes of the teachers. And then everything happened with Will Byers and the fallout that everyone needed to work through took its toll on everyone, but Mike more than most.

So it's good to see Mike happy and growing up like a normal teenage boy, doing normal things like spending time with his girlfriend.

But, Scott's aware he's starting to stare longer than is probably appropriate. So he clears his throat and calls out. "Michael Wheeler, as I live and breathe."

The two teens break apart lazily, like they're not anywhere close to being embarrassed at getting caught and/or interrupted. They don't move away from each other, Scott can't help but notice, and it brings a smile to his face. Both faces turn to look at him and Mike smiles. "Mr. Clarke, hi!"

Scott smiles on his approach, stopping only a few feet away. He looks at Mike's girlfriend, who's smiling prettily back in his direction, looking a little bashful – embarrassed at the interruption, maybe? Up close, Scott can see just what a beautiful young woman Mike's girlfriend is. No wonder Mike keeps glancing at her, looking all besotted.

"I don't believe we've met," Scott says. "I'm Scott Clarke. I taught this miscreant for 3 years at Hawkins Middle."

The girl giggles while Mike scowls. "Hey, I wasn't *that* bad."

"I'm Jane Hopper," she says. "But, most people call me El."

There's maybe a twinge of *something* in the back of Scott's head – a memory, or something? – but it's gone in a flash and Scott reaches out with his hand. "Jim Hopper's daughter, right?"

El takes his hand, turning in Mike's embrace to shake it. They still haven't separated and, well, if Mike and El don't feel the need to be awkward about it, Scott's not about to, either. "Yes, adopted, though."

Scott nods. He remembers the gossip that floated through Hawkins when word went around that the Chief had a new daughter. He doesn't pay too much attention to the word around town, but that was too noticeable and fervent for even him to ignore. "Well, it's nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you, too," she says. It's striking how polite she is. Pretty *and* nice; poor Mike Wheeler never stood a chance, did he?

"So, what keeps you two here so late?" Scott asks. "School got out hours ago."

Mike grins. "Oh, we're just waiting for–"

"Mr. Clarke!"

The voice makes Scott turn and he sees Will Byers heading towards him. "Will Byers," Scott calls out. "Looking pretty sharp, there."

Will grins, all toothy and buoyant – *happy*. It's a good look on him, Scott thinks, remembering the back half of Will's middle school career – sad, scared, jumping at every shadow. No, this is so much better. "Thanks Mr. Clarke. How are you doing?"

"Oh, same old, same old," Scott says before he remembers. "Oh, I'm getting married next summer!"

There's a flurry of laughter and giggles. "That's great, Mr. Clarke!" Mike says.

"Yeah, seriously," Will says. "I'm happy for you."

“Congratulations,” El chimes in last.

Scott smiles. “Thanks, you three.” He looks at Mike. “So, I take it you were waiting for Will?”

“Yeah,” Will answers. “He’s giving me and El a ride home since we live in the same house now.”

There must be a look of confusion that crosses over his face – because why would Will Byers and El Hopper be living in the same house? – because Mike lets out a chuckle and smiles. “Jim Hopper got married to Will’s mom the summer of last year. Didn’t you hear?”

Scott glances at the step-siblings and shakes his head, but he’s smiling, laughing a little. “I don’t pay too much attention to the gossip mill around here, so I hadn’t. Tell your parents congratulations for me.”

“I will,” Will says.

Scott shakes his head, still bemused. “Well, I should be going – my fiancée’s waiting for me at home.” Scott starts to turn, but stops. “Oh, and when you see Dustin, tell him I have the most recent Dungeons & Dragons DM manual if he wants it. I take it you’re still DMing, Mike?”

Mike smiles, laughing. “When I have time, yeah. You?”

Scott sighs. “It’s been ages since I last held a campaign.” Most of the friends he used to play with are scattered to the four winds and it’s been a long time since any of them were in near proximity for a good length of time. There are times where Scott misses his college days.

Mike perks up, an idea lighting up his eyes. “You should guest DM for us sometime, Mr. Clarke. I bet you have some great ideas.”

Scott grins. “I could teach you young’uns a thing or two, that’s true.” He pauses, thinking it over. “Well, I would be honored to, Mike.”

“Ooh, we could have it at the pizza parlor,” Will says, excitement threaded in every word. “They let people play D&D in there *all* the time.”

“You give me the time, and I’ll be there,” Scott says. “Now, I really should be heading home. You three, as well, I’m sure.”

“Right, yeah,” Mike says. “Bye, Mr. Clarke. We’ll see you later, yeah?”

Scott gives the three teens a lazy salute and heads over to his car, a smile on his face. Behind him, he can hear the three talking as they load up into the car.

“Were you guys making out again while you waited for me?” Will asks.

“Do we do anything else?” Mike says, while El, almost simultaneously, says “Until Mr. Clarke interrupted.”

Will lets out a sound that is part gag, part sigh. “God, you guys are gross sometimes.”

Scott’s laughing silently as he climbs into his car. Those kids...he hopes they never change. He hopes he’ll see them sooner rather than later.

(and he will. with dustin as the intermediary, they’ll arrange a d&d night at the local pizza parlor where scott will guest dm a campaign. steve harrington, of all people, will also show up, along with who scott will discover are the core members of the party – the boys, el, and max. they’ll do it a few times over the years, until the teens all head off to college – all 6 of them living in chicago, hours away, not in hawkins long enough for a campaign.

eventually, in 1994, start of the school year, young 8th grader holly wheeler will come up on the second day of school with an engraved envelope and a rushed “my brother wanted me to give this to you”. and when scott opens it and pulls out the invitation – “michael theodore wheeler and jane eleanor hopper request the honor of your company on sunday, november 4th, 1994” – he’ll twist his own gold wedding band on his ring finger and smile.

looks like mike wheeler got the girl, after all.)

Notes for the Chapter:

Ok, so I don't buy that Mr. Clarke would remember El, like, *at all*. He's known hundreds of kids and he only met El for, like, a minute back in '83 *and* she was wearing a blonde wig. Like, there might be something familiar about her? But that's about it.

Up next: the kiddos go to their first *~*high school party*~* and there's some Lumax drama brewing ahead (nothing too serious, folks!).

Also, come bug me on tumblr! I'm @fatechica there and I love being bugged. :)

25. Nov 1987

Notes for the Chapter:

Right, so, I once again didn't get to half of what I wanted to. So, Lumax drama is gonna have to wait for the next chapter.

But, you do get 15k words of the Party's first high school party.

So...halfway happy?

Warning: I've been calling this chapter the "the whole Party gets a bit of action" chapter. Now, nothing explicit (looking at *you two* in particular, Mike and El), but...yeah...forewarned is forearmed, I like to say. Still, got a bunch of almost 17 year olds over here, so, there are definitely things teenagers that age get up to (lord knows, I did...).

So, suggestive times ahead, y'all, plus some light alcohol and drug use and...it's a party, ok?

Nov 1987

"O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do. They pray; grant thou, lest faith turn to despair...Then move not, while my prayer's effect I take. Thus from my lips, by thine, my sin is purged."

The line is one Dustin's murmuring to himself, eyes shut, script open in his lap. His heart pounds in his chest and he's starting to sweat just a little bit, skin buzzing with nerves.

It's after school on a Monday in the middle of November and Dustin's having a minor panic attack as he sits in the empty Drama Club room.

He's been part of Drama Club since freshman year and joining was like finding a part of him he never knew existed, an outlet for something he never knew he needed until it was right in front of him.

Yeah, Dustin's always been a bit dramatic, a bit prone to exaggeration. And he's always had a good sense of comedic timing.

But he never thought he'd like acting as much as he does.

And he *loves* it.

He loves the costumes and the sets and the theatrics and all the *emotions*. Making people laugh or sad or happy or just touching them in some way is a joy.

When Dustin starts in Drama Club, he's pretty content to be a background character, part of the chorus, just one of the crowd. Yeah, he'll try out for the lead parts just to try, but he never expects to get them.

But then he auditions for the male lead in "Romeo and Juliet"...and ends up getting it.

Dustin Henderson is going to be playing Romeo in the winter play... and he's going to have to kiss a girl in front of *everyone*.

Small problem (and the source of his current panic attack): Dustin's never kissed a girl before. Especially not one as pretty as the girl who's playing Juliet.

And the girl playing Juliet? Well...

The door to the Drama room opens and Dustin opens his eyes to see Megan Shaughnessy walk in.

His Juliet.

Megan's a relative newcomer, only joining Drama Club this year. But she's good, like *really* good. Her audition blows everyone away – like, Mrs. Haversham cries and everything – so, really, there's no other choice *but* to cast her as the female lead.

At first, Dustin doesn't know what to think of Megan. He's known her since he moved to Hawkins back in the 4th grade, but she's always been part of a world Dustin could never touch – a world of popular people, where there are no bullies and everyone's all smiles and

beautiful all the time. So, Megan's just always *existed* on his periphery. The closest she got to his everyday life was back in 5th grade when Mike had the biggest crush on her and she used to get Mike to do her homework for him (when she even acknowledged his existence, that is).

So, for a while, that's been Dustin's impression of Megan: pretty, but kind of mean in the way that popular girls usually are.

But then he starts to get to know her during rehearsal.

It's impossible not to, really. The vast majority of their scenes are with each other and they end up running lines all the time when they have a chance, not to mention all the time they spend together in rehearsal.

And Dustin discovers that Megan Shaughnessy is so much more than a pretty mean girl.

Megan's *funny*, with a quick, wicked sense of humor that has Dustin laughing more often than not. And, she's smart. Not, like, super genius smart – but perceptive in a way that makes Dustin squirm sometimes with the things she notices. She laughs at some of his jokes, too, and not in a way that sounds fake, either. And, sometimes, she blushes when he says something nice or gets excited about something cool.

Also, and perhaps most relevant to Dustin's issues at the moment, Megan Shaughnessy is one of the prettiest girls he's ever seen. Like, seriously, he can see why Mike had a crush on her back in elementary school. And she's only gotten prettier since then. Long blonde hair that curls just so at the end, periwinkle blue eyes that sparkle when they catch the sun, pretty pink lips that are just *asking* to be kissed.

Yeah, Dustin has a crush on the girl he's supposed to kiss for a school play, a crush that is rapidly threatening to turn into more.

He's fucked and they haven't even *kissed* yet.

For a moment, all Dustin can do is just look at Megan. She's not

wearing anything special, just a pair of jeans and a dark blue sweater, but she's still beautiful all the same.

And then she smiles when she spots him and Dustin forgets what oxygen is for.

"Hey, Dustin," she says, voice carrying despite the quiet way she greets him. "Whatcha doing here so early?"

It takes Dustin half a second before he manages to collect himself and smile back. "Just running lines. And, really, I could ask the same of you," he says with a shrug.

Megan comes over and slides her backpack from her shoulders, plopping it down on the floor before sitting in the chair next to him. "Was thinking something similar," she says, giving him a shy smile.

There's a moment where their eyes meet for a little too long, a moment where Dustin's heart is beating so hard and fast, he would be surprised if Megan couldn't *hear* it.

But then it passes when Megan looks away. "So," she says – *god, is her voice trembling a little, or is he just hearing things?*

"Yeah," Dustin says. He's keenly aware, in this singular moment, that they haven't rehearsed their kiss yet. And Dustin wonders how much of that awareness is driven by the fact that he *very much* wants to kiss her. God, it's only a matter of time before they have to practice the kiss during rehearsal. In front of *everyone* in Drama Club. It's normal to be this nervous, right?

Maybe he should ask if she wants to practice with just the two of them.

That won't sound too...sleazy, right? Like, they've rehearsed lines together with just the two of them. And, really, they don't want to look like idiots during rehearsal, right?

Yes, Dustin, it's totally normal to ask to practice kissing with a girl you're going to have to kiss in front of hundreds of people.

Dustin takes a deep breath, mentally rehearsing what he wants to say – "Hey, Megan, I was thinking that maybe we should practice our kiss

for the play before everyone gets here. You know, so we don't look like total idiots. That's ok, right?" – but Megan speaks before he can.

"Oh, there's something I wanted to ask you!" she says, smile bright, hair bouncing as she flips it over her shoulder in a way that makes Dustin's brain short circuit, even as his heart's leaping into his throat from having worked up the courage only to ask to kiss her only to get cut off before he could follow through.

"Oh, yeah, um, sure. What is it?" Dustin says, swallowing the lump in his throat. *Oh god, what if **she's** asking to kiss him?*

"So, you know how Stacey's having that massive party this weekend?"

Dustin's heard the scuttlebutt – impossible not to, really. It's only been *all over* the school that Stacey's planning a big party. Her parents are gonna be out of town, which is the perfect excuse to have *everyone* from the school over.

Well, almost everyone. Because the Party certainly hasn't warranted an invite. El possibly would have, Dustin's pretty sure, but El's always turned down invitations in the past as far as Dustin knows.

Besides, Dustin's still smarting about Stacey's rejection of him at the Snow Ball back in 8th grade. So...yeah.

But, Megan's still smiling, still expecting an answer. "Uh, yeah, I've heard something about it," Dustin says. "Why?"

At this, Megan looks down, cheeks flushing in a way that makes Dustin want to reach out and touch her skin just to see if it's as soft and warm as it looks. But then she looks back up at him a split second later and Dustin freezes. "Well, I was wondering if you wanted to come? I mean, you and all your friends, like El and Mike and whatever. Stacey said I could invite people and, well..."

She wanted to invite him. Is he smiling like an idiot? He's pretty sure he *has* to be. "Uh, yeah!" Dustin says, voice cracking a bit. He clears his throat, tries to sound suave. "Yeah, sure. That sounds pretty cool. I mean, I'll have to see if I have plans" – he doesn't – "But, if not, we

can probably swing by for a bit.”

Megan lets out a giggle and Dustin feels like he’s King of the World. “Ok, see you there, then. Hopefully,” she says, punctuating her last word with a quirk of her eyebrow and a quick tilt of her head.

Other people start coming into the Drama Club room and the weird tension between Dustin and Megan bleeds away as the familiar routines of rehearsal get underway.

They don’t end up rehearsing the kiss today.

Dustin doesn’t know how he feels about that.

He does know, though, that he needs to convince the rest of the Party to go with him to Stacey’s bash. There’s *no way* Dustin can go to Stacey’s party alone. Just *no fucking way*. He *needs* his friends to go with him. Like, if shit goes south, he needs backup.

A Party Member Requires Assistance.

But Dustin also knows if he asks them all at once, their excuses will build on each other's.

No, Dustin needs to ask them one by one.

And he knows just who to start with.

There is almost no place Will likes better than the Art classroom at Hawkins High. With it’s wide, tall windows that stretch up towards the ceiling, filled with the scents of acrylic and canvas, with ozone and charcoal, natural lighting streaming across drafting tables, the Art Studio is his home away from home.

Will finds himself there, in the feel of a paint brush in his hand, a pencil between his fingers, of clay beneath his palm – the motions of creation. The sum of his experiences, the wishes he has for the future, the fears he has of the present...he channels all of it into his art. It all adds to the gravity of the Art classroom that pulls him in as often as he can let it.

Creating art, however, is not the only thing that pulls Will into the Art classroom.

Late afternoon sun shines into through the tall windows, splashing shadows across the canvas Will is working on, his fingers splattered with paint flecks in all manner of colors as he paints, acrylic streaking across the fabric surface.

It's his latest project for Art Studio, a work done in an abstract style of his choice. Will's not sure, yet, but the picture that's forming is something between Jackson Pollock and Picasso, blocks of color punctuated with splashes of color, both chaotic and orderly, wild and constrained.

He's staying late this day, this Tuesday afternoon, to finish up as much of this piece as possible before the Friday due date.

And Will's not the only student spending the extra time finishing up a project for Art Studio.

Movement out of the corner of his eye draws Will's attention half away from his work and, the moment he looks away even a little, his heart begins to speed up.

Because Eric DeSanto just walked into the Art classroom and Will's in love with him.

Ok, maybe that's an exaggeration.

But how else to describe the way Will's heart picks up or the way his palms start to sweat or the way his stomach swoops when Eric so much as *looks* at him?

Eric looks over and Will quickly looks away, praying to whatever higher power might be listening that his cheeks aren't horribly red.

Still, Will can feel the thrum of his blood pumping beneath his skin. It's like he's hyper-aware of everything going on around him, like every inch of him keenly feels Eric's presence in the room.

"Hey, Will," Eric says as he walks further into the room.

God, even his voice is fantastic, Will thinks as a shiver runs down his spine, all smooth and deep and just heartbeat-skipping good. *Jesus, keep yourself together.*

Will smiles and turns to look at Eric fully. "Hey, Eric," he says. His voice was steady, right?

"Working on your abstract project?" Eric's smiling and Will thinks he might die. Damn Eric for being so handsome. Son of a Spanish father and American mother, Eric is all smooth, lightly tanned skin and wavy brown hair, with a strong jaw and broad shoulders that lead to nicely muscled arms and beautifully tapered wrists.

Eric's moving into the room, approaching the space where Will is set up, which is right near where the other students keep their in-progress projects.

"Yeah," Will responds. "You?"

"Gotta get some work in some time," Eric says. "Senior year is keeping me busier than I thought."

"Junior year doesn't feel much better," Will says as Eric passes behind him to the corner where his canvas is sitting.

Eric lets out a sound that is almost a scoff. "Yeah, Junior year sucks pretty bad." There's some rustling around in the space behind where Will is sitting as Eric gathers his things. Will can practically *feel* Eric behind him like an extension of his own body.

"Must not have been that bad," Will says. "You made it through ok, right?"

The sounds behind him stop and Will sees Eric leaning into his peripheral vision, so Will turns to look. "Hey, what are you trying to say? That I'm not smart?" The look on Eric's face is flat, unreadable –

angry?

Will feels his stomach sink down to the floor as he realizes how his words could be interpreted. “No, that’s not – I mean, I didn’t say – god, I’m so sor-”

Eric lets out a laugh and shakes his head, cutting Will off mid-ramble. “Man, I’m just kidding. I knew what you meant.”

Will sighs, feeling the relief flood his veins. “Oh, good. Because I don’t think you’re not smart.”

Eric reaches out with his paint brush and taps Will on the shoulder. “Watch out for those double negatives, Mr. Byers,” he says with a wink and Will almost fucking *swoons*.

There’s a long moment of silence as Eric sets up his own canvas and Will can’t help but fidget a bit. It’s not that it’s uncomfortable, per se. The silence is just a bit...heavy, maybe? Will’s heart picks up its pace, beating thunderously in his chest. Anticipation buzzes along every inch of his skin, like the air right before a lightning storm, all build up and tension before the sky erupts. Will feels like he’s standing at the precipice of something, but he has no idea *what*.

“Hey, Will, do you, um...think you could come and look at something for me?”

The tone in Eric’s voice sounds so hesitant, so lost, that Will’s heart immediately goes out to him. “Yeah, what’s wrong?” Will says, putting down his brush and sliding off of his stool to head over.

The painting on Eric’s canvas is all smooth brush strokes, interspersed with strong lines set at harsh angles, like looking at a sunset through a cracked window. It’s good, *evocative*, and Will really likes the colors, all piercing blues and muted oranges. Will steps closer to where Eric’s leaning against another stool, one leg propped up on the cross bar. “So, what’s the problem?” Will rephrases.

Eric sighs. “It’s just...not working.”

Will glances at Eric, one eyebrow raised in skeptical confusion, before he looks back at the canvas. “I think it’s pretty good, actually. But,

why don't you tell me why you think it's not working." It's a line he's heard their art teacher, Mr. White, use before, to help other students through their frustrations.

Eric sighs again and leans over, close to Will. He reaches out to point at the canvas, somewhere in the middle. "You see this? The lines here? They're all wrong."

Will focuses on the canvas, letting himself get drawn into the art, into trying to see what Eric's seeing. "I'm not sure what you're talking about," Will says, eyes narrowing.

"It's right here," Eric says. "Look."

Will leans closer, caught up in the mystery, eyes searching and coming up with nothing. "I'm sorry, but I'm not-"

"Are you sure you're looking?"

The words are both somewhat teasing and very anxious and Will turns to look back at Eric. "I'm sure I-" Will cuts off mid-sentence, mind going blank. Somewhere in the last 30 seconds, Eric's moved closer so that he's only a handful of inches away from Will, his face so close Will can feel his breath on every exhale.

Everything freezes, time ceases to matter, and Will's not entirely sure his heart's not going to burst out of his chest. He looks over at Eric – is unable to look away, actually – and he just *waits*. Waits for something to happen, for Eric to move, for *anything*. Because Will can't be the one to move, even though he so badly wants to lean in, to close the distance and press his lips against Eric's. He's just not brave enough.

Will survived a week in the Upside Down, fought against the Mind Flayer for possession of his own body, but he can't bring himself to kiss the beautiful boy he likes so much. If he does, and it's the wrong move – if Eric's not into guys – Will doesn't know if he can bear the embarrassment. God, he hasn't even told his friends that he's gay, the only two who know are El and Jonathan. He can't risk outing himself if his feelings aren't returned. He just *can't*.

So, while Will waits, he watches Eric, looks for any kind of clue or sign. Eric smiles, just slightly. “Hi,” he says, voice low.

Will feels his lips twitch with a smile that feels more scared than anything. “Hi,” he manages to get out, his own voice sounding like a croak.

Will’s staring straight at Eric’s eyes and watching as the other boy’s gaze flits from point to point, like Eric doesn’t know where he wants to be looking.

But, Eric’s not pulling away, which is more encouraging than anything Will’s ever experienced. Still, he’s frozen in place, all confusion and anticipation and *oh god, please*.

Then Eric starts leaning in – at least, Will’s pretty sure he’s leaning in – and Will forgets how to breathe.

And just when Will thinks this is *finally* going to happen, the door to the Art classroom bursts open and someone shouts out Will’s name.

“Will, there you are!”

It’s Dustin calling out for him and, in a blink, the distance between Eric and Will is a respectable couple of feet, like nothing was ever about to happen. And, even though there’s something in Dustin’s voice that speaks to a deeper worry, like he really needs Will’s help, Will can’t help but be so fucking annoyed. His body burns with anticipation cut short and he really, really wishes Dustin had come in a minute later. Because then Will wouldn’t be stuck wondering over what was about to happen, wouldn’t be stuck with this lingering dissatisfaction.

But, Will’s also not the kind of person to linger over stuff like this, so he turns to Dustin and smiles. “Hey, what’s up?”

“Dude, I need to talk to you,” Dustin says as Will goes back over to his own painting.

Will raises his eyebrows and looks up at Dustin while he reaches out for his paintbrush. “Everything ok?”

Dustin lets out a laugh that is tinged with hysteria and he shakes his head. “No. I need a favor.”

Immediately, every cell in Will’s body fills with the urge to help. “Yeah, man, anything you need.”

Then Dustin grins and Will’s suddenly starting to regret being so helpful. “Go with me to Stacey’s party this weekend.”

Will’s eyes widen. “Excuse me?” That’s the *last* thing Will expects Dustin to say.

Dustin sighs. “So, you know Megan Shaughnessy?”

The name rings a bell and it takes Will a moment to place it. “The girl who’s playing Juliet?”

Dustin smiles and blushes and Will very suddenly knows where this is going. “Yeah, um, she...well, she invited me to Stacey’s party, said I could bring my friends and...” Dustin trails off, face going serious, a small frown pulling down his lips. “I really like her, Will.”

Will hums, considering. “Do you think she likes you too?” he asks. He knows Dustin’s only telling him because he’s the only person besides El who wouldn’t tease him about his crush.

Dustin shrugs and looks down at the floor briefly, but Will can see the play of emotions on his face anyway – the fervent hope, the fear – all familiar emotions. “Maybe?” Dustin says after a moment. “I don’t know. I thought there was a moment in the Drama club room a couple of days ago, but...” He shrugs again. “I don’t know. But I *do* know that I need to be at this party and I can’t go alone, Will. I *can’t*.”

Will purses his lips and sighs. “I don’t know,” he says. “We’ve never been to a high school party before....”

Dustin clasps his hands in front of him. Oh god, he’s *begging* now.... “Please? I’ll never ask you for anything ever again.” That’s a lie and they both know it, but Will doesn’t call him out about it.

“You guys talking about Stacey’s party?”

It's Eric's voice and Will turns to look at him, feeling his heart do the normal flutter it always does when he looks at him. "Yeah, why?"

Eric smiles. "A bunch of friends and I are going, so, if you go, maybe I'll see you there."

Will turns back to Dustin in a rush and says, voice low, "Ok, I'll go with you."

The beginnings of a breathless smile start to pull at the corners of Dustin's lips. "Seriously?"

Will nods. "Seriously."

The smile turns full blown and Dustin lets out a laugh. "Oh my god, *thank you!*" Dustin says, rushing forward to give Will a quick, hard hug. "Now, all we have to do is convince the others to go."

That stops Will short. "Wait, what?"

As it turns out, convincing the others isn't all that hard. Once Will tells El that Dustin wants them to go with him because a girl he likes invited them, she agrees to go, eager to help. This means that Mike is also eager to go, because he'd do anything for El. And Lucas and Max don't want to be left out of the loop, so they agree to go, as well.

And this is how Mike finds himself in the station wagon (which is officially his now, after his dad bought a new car and gave his mom the BMW) on a Friday night, wearing what he would if he were taking El out on a date – which he kind of is even though a high school party is not his idea of a date? – with Dustin in the outer, front passenger seat and Lucas in the middle in the back, arms propped against the back of the front bench seat so he can lean forward and keep his head close to Dustin and Mike's.

"Thank you guys so much," Dustin says. "I promise, you won't regret it."

Mike and Lucas share a look as Mike drives them over to Max's house to pick her up on their way to pick up Will and El. "Don't worry about it, Dustin. A Party member requires assistance," Mike says, grinning.

Lucas knocks Mike's shoulder with a light tap of his fist. "Sorry you can't drink tonight, man." Because there is going to be alcohol. But, as Mike's driving, he's not about to imbibe.

So, Mike just shrugs. "Nah, it's cool. I don't mind being DD. Just as long as you guys don't get so hammered that you puke in my car, we're all good."

Though, really, is he? For the hundredth time, Mike wonders what the hell they're even doing going to a high school party – it's not like they've ever really been invited before (El not withstanding). And, if not for Dustin's crush on Megan Shaughnessy (god, everything really does come back around, doesn't it?), they wouldn't even be invited *this time*, much less going.

They pick up Max, who's wearing tight jeans and a halter top that makes Lucas' jaw drop (she presses a quick kiss to Lucas' mouth after she closes his jaw and the kiss turns heated milliseconds later in a way that has Mike and Dustin looking away), before they make the quick drive to the Hopper-Byers household.

"You guys stay here," Mike says. "I'll go get them."

He bounds up the stairs, cool November air biting the skin of his face and neck. With a quick press of the doorbell to announce his arrival, Mike opens the front door and steps in. El's home is his second home, especially after everything that happened with his mom a year ago, and Hop has repeatedly told him he doesn't need to knock or ring the doorbell before walking in through the front door, but...Mike still wants to be respectful.

"Hey, I'm here!" he calls out. It's just after 8:30 and Mike goes into the living room to peek into the family room where Hop and Joyce are watching TV. "Hi Hop, hi Joyce." He's only recently felt comfortable enough call Joyce by her given name and he still trips up on it every once in a while.

Both the adults turn to look at him and smile. "Hey, Mike," Joyce says. "Will and El are still getting ready upstairs."

"Yeah, I figured," Mike says with a shrug, coming over to lean against the armrest of the couch, only half paying attention to what's on the screen.

Mike feels something against his knee and he looks down to see Hop tapping his knee with a knuckle. "You're the designated driver tonight, right?"

Mike nods. "Yessir," he says, half grinning.

Hop arches an eyebrow. "You do know that means no drinking, right?" Mike looks a little startled and Hop just laughs. "Please, I was 16 once too, you know. I know there's drinking at these things."

Mike lets out a breathy chuckle. "Well, don't worry. I won't be drinking. I know what being a DD means. I'll stick to water and sodas."

"Thataboy," Hop says with another tap of his knee. "Watch out for the others, ok?"

By now, Mike's straight out smiling. "Always, Hop."

Hop lets out a breathed laugh that makes Mike feel especially warm inside, but the sound of footsteps pulls his attention away before he can think too heavily on the feeling. Mike gets up from the arm of the chair and heads into the living room to see Will coming down the stairs, followed closely by El.

For a moment, only Will is visible and he looks...dressier than normal? Yeah, they're going to a party and all, but even so.... Will's hair is slicked back and he's wearing what must be the nicest shirt he owns, a dark blue button up with the sleeves rolled up. *Ooookay*, Mike thinks, wondering where this is coming from.

But then he sees El and his brain short-circuits, all thoughts about Will out of his head. Her hair cascades down her shoulders and back in loose, sensual curls. She's wearing tight, acid washed jeans and a flowing, button-up tank top with spaghetti-thin straps, thin white

fabric covered with pale pink, almost translucent flowers, looking like something from the late 60s or early 70s. The low V-neckline slopes down across her chest in a way that makes Mike's mouth go dry. And he *knows*, knows in the way that speaks to the number of times he's seen her without her shirt on, that she's not wearing anything under that tank top. *Jesus Christ*.

El gets down to the first floor landing and smiles over at him, lips curled knowingly.

Mike shakes his head, smiling back. *Minx*.

What? Her mental voice is coy, teasing – she knows what she's doing to him. She's eyeing him appreciatively, too, and Mike smiles.

Like what you see? He asks and there's a particular sparkle in her eye when she says *Always* that makes his heart skip a beat.

In her hand is a thin, black, faux-leather jacket that she shrugs on before walking over to give him a quick kiss. "Hey, there," El murmurs.

"Hi," he says, temporarily mesmerized by her, before he looks over at Will, who's putting on his own jacket. "You two ready?"

Will nods. "Yeah, I think so."

The couch creaks behind Mike and he sees Hop come into his peripheral vision a couple moments later. "Now, you two be smart tonight, ok?" Hop says, looking back and forth between Will and El.

El smiles and nods. "Of course, Dad," she says, going over to give him a kiss on the cheek. "Don't wait up for us."

"Fat chance," Hop says as El pulls back. "Anything goes south, you give me a call, alright?"

"We will," Mike says.

And then they're out the door and heading to the car where the other three are waiting. There's a bit of jeering over what took them so long as they get into the car, plus some complaining from Dustin

about being stuck in the car with Lucas and Max who were making out *the entire time*, but soon, Mike's backing out of the driveway to the sound of the radio blaring and everyone else laughing.

Stacey's party, here they come.

Megan bites her lip and twists back and forth in front of the mirror, uncertainty sitting heavy in her stomach.

God, what do you wear when you're trying to attract a nerd?

Right now, Megan's wearing a soft, black skirt with tiny pink and blue flowers, hem hitting just below mid-thigh, and a white, wide-strapped tank-top tucked in to the skirt to hug close to her waist. Her hair is pulled away from her face with a couple of twisted braids that are tied together at the back of her head, but most of her blonde tresses are spilling freely down her shoulders.

It's not too much, Megan thinks as she stands in Stacey's bedroom. Or, at least, she hopes it's not too much.

Because the last thing she wants to do is scare away or turn off Dustin Henderson, as much as she can't believe this is where she's at in her life right now.

Join Drama Club to play Juliet, end up with a crush on Dustin Henderson. How did this happen?

She knows how this happened, though. She suddenly starts spending time with Dustin, as they prepare for their leading roles, hours spent running lines and hanging out in rehearsal. And she discovers that he really is sweet and funny and just so *nice*. He looks at her like she's a person, not just a hot piece, and they have conversations where he's actually interested in what she has to say, even though she feels like an idiot next to him. But his excitement is so contagious that she always feels herself get swept away by it and all her self-consciousness flies out the window.

And it doesn't help that Dustin's pretty cute – something about the cut of his jaw, and the way his eyes crinkle when he smiles, and the sweep of his lips whenever he has something funny he wants to say.

So, yeah, Megan has, like, the biggest crush on Dustin. And she doesn't know if he likes her back. Sometimes, she thinks he might, like there'll be these moments when he *looks* at her and she thinks he's trying to memorize everything about her, like he always wants to have an image of her in his mind to carry with him. But, those moments are quick to fade, leaving Megan confused and uncertain, but still hopeful.

“So, who's the guy?”

The sound of Stacey's voice behind her pulls Megan from her thoughts and Megan hope the blush she feels spreading across her cheeks is hidden enough behind the makeup she's wearing. “What are you talking about?”

Megan turns to look at Stacey, who's sitting on her bed, a teasing smile on her lips. “C'mon, Megan, you're not fooling anyone. You only get this worried about how you look when there's a guy. So, come on, spill it! Who is he?”

Megan looks away, feeling sick at the way embarrassment creeps into her stomach. She shouldn't be embarrassed, really – it's not like Dustin is some horrible person – but she just *knows* how Stacey'll be if she admits that Dustin's the guy she's trying to impress. “I...I don't want to say,” Megan says. “I don't even know if he likes me, so....” She trails off with a shrug. “It's not worth worrying about, really.”

Stacey scoffs. “Oh, please, whoever he is would be a fool not to be madly in love with you. But, fine, don't tell me who he is. I'm sure I'll figure it out eventually.” Stacey stands up from her bed and grabs Megan by the hand. “C'mon, the others are downstairs and I want to make sure they're not drinking all the booze before the party gets started.”

And, so, Megan follows behind, trying not to let her nerves swallow her whole.

She's only partly successful.

Mike parks just a bit down the street from Stacey's house – close enough to see the house, but just outside of the giant crowd of cars parked in front.

Dustin's stomach swirls with nerves and there's a high probability that he's going to be sick, he thinks.

An elbow nudges him in the side and Dustin turns to see Max looking at him, concerned smirk on her face (only she can pull off such a contradictory expression). "Hey, you ok, Dusty?"

Dustin swallows and nods, trying to hide just how nervous he is. But, it's useless, because the whole Party knows about his crush on Megan and he's not a good enough actor to hide *anything* from them. "Yeah, I'm ok, I think."

Max's smirk turns into a smile and she gives him a light punch on the shoulder. "Everything'll be fine. Look, I don't know Megan that well – you know me and popular girls – but if she doesn't like you back, well, it's her loss."

Dustin hears the sentiment behind Max's words, even though the thought of Megan not liking him back makes him feel even worse, and he gives her a grateful smile. "Thanks, MadMax."

Max shrugs a shoulder. "Anytime, Loser."

It's just after 9 when the Party arrives at Stacey's house – late enough to be fashionable, early enough that it's not *too* crazy yet. The crowd's just getting into full swing and the Party can hear the sounds of music and people even from outside the house.

The front door is wide open and when the Party steps through, there's a moment where they just *look*. Inside is all bass thumping music, crowds milling about, hands clutching red Solo cups, a fine haze of cigarette smoke in the air.

The moment is broken when Max grabs Lucas' hand and pulls. "C'mon, Stalker. Let's go get drunk and make out somewhere."

Lucas gives the rest of the Party a wink as Max drags him into the crowd, a smug grin twisting his lips.

And then there are 4, standing just inside the foyer, trying to figure out what's next.

Dustin's in the middle of wondering just what to do when, for a moment, the crowd parts in front of him just so and he sees *her*.

Megan's standing in the far side of what appears to be the living room, red Solo cup in one hand, looking just absolutely *beautiful*, all long legs and lush curves, shining blonde hair, pretty and kissable and *oh god*. Dustin feels his heart pick up its pace, heartbeat almost painful in his chest, and he gulps.

Then Megan looks over, their eyes meet, and Dustin wants to die when she smiles and starts to head over. She glides through the crowds, slipping easily between bodies, stopping as she approaches. "Hey, guys, you made it!" she says.

"Hi, Megan," El says, stepping forward to give Megan a hug. Dustin smiles, a little surprised before he remembers that the two are friends.

"Thanks for inviting us," Will says as El and Megan break apart.

"Oh, of course! Any friend of El and Dustin's is a friend of mine," Megan says, her smile bright as she flips her hair over her shoulder and Dustin's just *smitten*, she's so pretty.

The sound of someone calling Megan's name from further inside the house pulls her attention away from Dustin and the others and she spares a moment to look at them with a small, apologetic smile. "Oh, hold on a minute. I'll be right back, I promise." She's gone a moment later, disappearing behind the swarm of moving bodies, and it hits Dustin that he hadn't said *a thing* while she was standing in front of him. He'd just stood and stared at her like a fucking mouth breather.

God, you're an idiot.

The four of them stand there for a bit before Dustin sighs, his heart sinking, disappointment making him feel heavy. “She’s not coming back, is she?”

Mike claps him on the shoulder. “Sorry, man.” Mike’s looking at him with a small smile that’s full of pity. Dustin can’t blame him. He pities himself for falling for such an unattainable girl.

El slips her hand into Mike’s and, giving Dustin an apologetic smile, looks up at Mike. “Come on, let’s go find Max and Lucas, make sure they’re not getting into too much trouble.”

Dustin watches Mike and El disappear into the crowd and his heart sinks further into his chest. Because now it’s just him and Will, the two miserable singles of the Party.

Well, this sucks.

Will looks around at the assembled crowds, feels the bass of the music rattle his bones. But the beat of his heart, the nervous tremor that runs through his veins, that’s from something different.

Because, somewhere, Eric DeSanto is here in this house and Will *needs* to find him.

Next to him, Dustin’s still standing, looking crestfallen. The others have disappeared into the crowd, leaving just the two of them, and Will’s heart goes out to him. The girl he likes promised to come back and just *abandoned* him; that’s gotta sting.

So, Will reaches out and grabs Dustin by the arm. “Hey, let’s go explore the house, see what there is to get up to,” he says. “You never know, we might even find Megan on the way.”

Dustin looks over at Will, a hopeful smile pulling at his lips. “Yeah?”

Will smiles and hopes it comes across as reassuring. “Yeah. Now, c’mon, let’s go.”

Will pulls Dustin along with him and tries not to let the guilt pull at him too hard. Because *friends don't lie* and Will didn't tell Dustin the truth about why he's leading the two of them in exploring the house, that he's looking for the guy he has a crush on because he just needs to see him *so bad*.

So, the two of them explore the house, peeking into rooms, taking stock of what everyone's doing. Will feels hope begin to bleed from him as they move through the throngs of people. *Maybe Eric wasn't able to make it, maybe he changed his mind about coming.*

But, then, Will opens the door to what looks like the den and he lets out a small gasp. *Oh, there you are.*

Eric's sitting on the floor among a group of people Will actually recognizes, mostly other art students. But Will only has eyes for Eric, who's looking oh so good in a tight t-shirt and equally tight pair of jeans as he sits with his legs folded in front of him, elbows resting on his knees. And, in his hands, is a lighter and a few rolled joints.

Eric looks up as the door opens and smiles when he spots Will. Will feels his heart speed up in response. "Hey, Will, you're here! And Will's friend. Dustin, is it?"

Will can feel Dustin tense beside him, confusion radiating from the other boy. "Uh, yeah, that's right."

"We were about to light up," one of the others, Adler, says, smiling through a heavy-lidded expression.

Eric chuckles. "You two should join us. There's plenty to go around."

Will smiles, feeling himself entering familiar territory, nostalgia hitting him, and turns to Dustin. "You want to stay?"

Dustin feels the uncertainty crest inside of him. He knows what that Eric guy is holding and, well, he's never been in the same room as anyone smoking pot before, much less smoked it himself.

But Will looks so hopeful that Dustin can't bear to say no. "Uh, yeah, sure." Besides, it's not like he has anywhere else to be, anyone else to see. *Megan's gone and she's not coming back. He came out to this party to have a good time. Might as well see what this is all about.*

Dustin shuts the door behind him as he follows Will into the room, the circle of people shifting to make room for the both of them, Will sitting next to Eric and Dustin sitting next to Will.

The room fills with crosstalk, people chatting over each other, but Dustin's watching as Eric clamps one of the joints between his lips and lights it. A faint stream of smoke begins curling from the end as Eric inhales, holding the breath for several moments, before pulling the joint away from his lips and exhaling.

"Here," Eric says, passing it to Will.

Much to Dustin's surprise, there's no hesitation *at all* as Will takes the joint in one hand, pinching it lightly between his thumb and forefinger, other three fingers outstretched, and brings it to his lips, taking a hit with a familiarity like it's something he does all the time.

Dustin's aware that his jaw has dropped. "Holy shit, Will," he breathes, the smell of pot slowly filling the room as Will pulls the joint away from his lips, exhaling a cloud of smoke a few seconds later.

Will shrugs, smiling at Dustin, as he hands over the joint. "You want a hit? You can say no, if you don't."

Dustin stares down at the joint in Will's outstretched hands and, for a moment, he's torn between fear and curiosity. But, in the end, curiosity wins out and Dustin takes the joint from Will. And, in front of a bunch of people he doesn't know and one of his best friends on the planet, Dustin does his best to copy what Will did. "Take it easy," Will says, guiding Dustin through the experience. "Breathe in slowly with your mouth. Yeah, that's it. Now, exhale."

Dustin follows Will's instructions, tastes the pot smoke in his mouth, feels it filling his lungs, before exhaling like he watched Will and Eric do moments before.

Dustin passes off to the person on his other side before he turns back to Will, question burning inside of him. “Dude, when have you smoked pot before?”

Will smiles, a bit bashful, and shrugs. “Jonathan smokes,” he says. “He lets me smoke it with him sometimes.”

“Whoa,” Dustin breathes, his problems temporarily forgotten as he revels in the new knowledge Will just bestowed upon him. “That’s pretty cool.”

Will ducks his head, blushing a bit. “Yeah?”

Dustin laughs. “Totally.”

For the moment, Dustin lets himself exist in the moment, watching as people pass around joints, taking a hit whenever one of them comes his way. It doesn’t take long for the pot to hit him, making him feel loose and giggly and *happy*.

And, suddenly, things don’t seem so bad and Dustin’s worries bleed away. Whatever happens from here, happens. And Dustin’s totally ok with that.

Time ceases to have concrete meaning, El realizes. She’s sitting pressed up against Mike’s side on a couch that’s been shoved against the wall to make room for a makeshift dance floor. His arm’s slung over her shoulder, his palm warm against her bare skin.

El doesn’t know how long they’ve been sitting there – it could be an hour, it could be *three*.

Out on the dance floor, Max and Lucas are half dancing, half making out, leaning against each other drunkenly and El watches them, only somewhat interested. There’s an empty Solo cup by her feet, a remnant of the single beer she’s consumed, and she really doesn’t want another one.

God, she's *bored*. There's a party around her, people laughing and drinking and having fun, and El's wishing she were anywhere *but* here.

El looks over at Mike, who's staring out at the crowd just as disinterestedly, and she feels her heart skip its usual beat as she drinks in the sight of him.

He's wearing a jeans and a simple button down, sleeves rolled up to show off his forearms, top buttons undone revealing the hollow of his throat, the start of his collarbones. His hair is its usual, artfully messy cloud of dark locks, swept away from his face the best he can manage, and every once in a while, he shakes his head to toss his hair away from his forehead.

Something catches Mike's eye and El watches as he turns his head to look, tendons standing out along the length of his neck at the motion. El *very suddenly* wants to drag her teeth down the length of his neck, wants to trace the line of that tendon with her lips and tongue, she realizes, face warming, heart picking up speed.

God, she wants him. Heat fills her veins, pools low in her belly, making her skin itch with need.

El's aware she's probably staring at him like she wants to devour him, but she can't help herself.

And then an idea comes to mind and El grins. She leans in close and feels Mike jump in surprise as she nuzzles her nose against his neck. *Hey, wanna go make out in the car?* She punctuates the question by reaching up and tugging on his earlobe with her teeth before sucking it between her lips, making him shiver against her, a low moan rumbling through him.

El's still smiling as Mike pulls away enough to look down at her, one eyebrow raised in amused excitement, like his night is suddenly beginning to look up. *Do you even have to ask?*

Giggling, El stands up, reaching behind her for both of their jackets with one hand, grabbing Mike's hand with the other, before she pulls him to his feet and starts leading them towards the front door.

Her night's about to get significantly less boring.

The den is warm and languid, smelling heavily of pot in a way that is both comforting and exciting for Will. It reminds him of Jonathan, of nights spent in Castle Byers, a joint shared between the two of them as they talk and laugh about anything and everything.

His whole left side buzzes from the proximity to Eric, who's sitting mere inches away. Will can't count how many times he's had to stop himself from reaching out to touch Eric, giggling each time he manages to restrain himself (though that's the pot talking...or is it?).

A gasp to his right has Will looking over at Dustin and he laughs again. Dustin's looking like he just remembered he left the stove on at home and it's the funniest thing Will's ever seen. "Oh my god," Dustin breathes, a smile stretching his lips. "I know what we need." He turns to look at Will. "We need snacks. I'm suddenly *starving*."

Will shakes his head, still giggling. "Dude, that's the pot talking."

Dustin shrugs. "Doesn't make it less true," he retorts, starting to stand. "I'll go see what I can dig up."

Dustin's out the door when it hits Will that he might need some help, so Will gets up to follow, always ready and willing to support a friend in need.

But when Will steps out into the hallway, he feels a hand circle his wrist and he turns to see Eric standing just behind him. Suddenly, Will's heart leaps into his throat, all thoughts of Dustin forgotten as his senses fill with the beautiful young man in front of him – the smell of marijuana and aftershave, the dazzling brilliance of his eyes and hair, the smoothness of his skin, the softness of his fingers where they wrap around Will's wrist.

"Hey, can I talk to you?" Eric says, the smile stretching his lips looking both enticing and sweet at the same time. "Alone?"

The giddy feeling inside of Will swells to the point where he doesn't even feel tethered to the ground anymore. Is he floating? He just might be.

Will lets out a giggle. "Sure. Where?" His voice sounds both breathy and casual, and Will's somewhat glad for the way the pot relaxes him. Without it, he'd be a jittery mess right about now.

Eric tugs Will down the hall. "This way," Eric says. "I know a place."

It occurs to Will that Eric's still holding onto his hand as they walk down the hallways and excitement bubbles up in his stomach, heating his skin, hope swelling inside his chest.

Eric opens a door and, after a quick check, pulls Will inside after him.

For a moment, Will's distracted by looking around the small storage room Eric's found for them to talk alone in, blankets and pillows sitting on shelves above boxes of miscellaneous items. He wonders what's inside of them, wonders what sort of stuff rich people like Stacey's family keeps stored away from prying eyes. But the sound of Eric clearing his throat pulls Will back to the moment at hand.

"Hi," Will says, smiling.

Eric returns the expression, though it looks a little...scared? Why scared? Will's not scary – he's *adorable*, everyone says so. "Hi," Eric says. "So, um, you're probably wondering why I dragged you in here."

Will shrugs. "You don't have to explain." And, really, he doesn't. Will's just happy to be in the same room as Eric, to be perfectly honest.

Eric sighs. "No, I want to. It's just...." Another sigh. "I'm scared."

Will laughs. "You don't have to be scared. Just tell me. I promise, I won't freak out."

Eric gulps – Will's brain goes blank for a moment at the sight of Eric's adam's apple bobbling and, god, he wants to kiss that spot and – wait, Eric's talking and Will needs to pay attention. "We've been

friends for a while, you know? And it's been good, getting to know you, talking about art, hanging out in that classroom. But it's not enough for me. And I know I should wait until you're sober, until we're both not high, but I'm not brave enough to do this any other way. I like you, Will – I *really* like you and I wanted to kiss you so bad in the art classroom the other day and I think you wanted me to kiss you, too, but I'm not sure and-”

Will's staring up at Eric, happy disbelief flooding his veins, listening as Eric confesses his feelings. He can't believe this is happening, can't believe he gets to live in this moment, hearing the words he's only dreamed of hearing. As Eric talks, Will's gaze drops down to his lips, *especially* once Eric mentions what Will now knows is that almost-kiss they shared a few days ago. And Will knows he can't wait anymore, that he needs to know if Eric's lips feel as soft as they look.

So, as Eric talks about that moment in the art classroom, Will reaches out and, grabbing a fistful of Eric's shirt, pulls him down so Will can lean up and kiss him.

Yeah, just as soft as they look.

Dustin makes his way through the house, trying to find the kitchen, deep hunger gnawing at his stomach.

He passes through the living room and spots Max and Lucas leaning against the wall. They're making out, Max's arms around Lucas' neck, his around her waist, one hand low on her hip, just above her butt.

Dustin grins. *Maybe they know where the kitchen is.*

He heads towards them, but a familiar flash of blonde out of the corner of his eye distracts him and Dustin turns to see Megan standing with the other popular girls and their boyfriends, the small crowd just a handful of feet away from Max and Lucas. *Ooh, should go talk to Megan instead.*

Dustin pivots and changes course, walking straight towards Megan, smile on his face. “Hey, Megan,” he says once he’s close enough, making sure to speak loud enough to be heard over the music.

Megan smiles and opens her mouth to speak, but is cut off by Stacey. “God, what are you doing over here?” Stacey says, sneering a bit. “I know you and Megan are in that stupid school play together, but that doesn’t make you cool enough to talk to us in *public*. Why don’t you go crawling back to you stupid nerd friends and leave us alone.” All the other girls around Stacey laugh, all tittering giggles and grotesque, mocking smiles.

It’s like someone sucked all the air out of the room in an instant. Dustin gasps and it’s like a punch to the stomach. He looks over at Megan, who’s still smiling-

(he doesn’t realize her face is frozen in shock and disbelief)

-and the hunger in his stomach turns to nausea. He can’t stop the tears that burn behind his eyes and he takes a few stumbling steps back before turning on his heel and walking away as fast as he can. The house feels too small, too suffocating, and he needs air *right now*.

“Dustin, wait!” he hears faintly behind him over the sound of partygoers having the time of their life around him.

Dustin doesn’t know who the voice is – it’s too noisy to tell for sure – but he doesn’t know he’s not stopping for anyone. Not anymore.

She loves the feel of his lips on hers, of his arms wrapped around her. Lust mixes with the alcohol that swims in her veins, a heady cocktail that Max just *luxuriates* in.

But not even the feel of Lucas kissing her like he never wants to be doing anything else can turn off the part of Max’s brain that is situationally aware of everything around her.

So, she can faintly hear the sounds of Dustin saying hi to Megan,

followed by the snide remark that Stacey delivers *loudly* and, even through the haze of passion that surrounds her, anger bubbles in Max's blood. *Bitch said what?*

Max pushes Lucas away to the sound of his disappointed moan. "Max?" he asks, voice ragged in a way that normally makes her shiver, but Max is too focused on other things.

She can see Dustin walking away like his ass is on fire, can see Megan chasing after him a few seconds later, but the bulk of her attention is focused on Stacey, who's standing there, sneer frozen on her face.

Max moves past Lucas, who's still trying to get her attention to figure out what's going on, and marches over to Stacey. "Hey, bitch," Max calls out. Stacey looks over at the sound of Max's voice and raises her eyebrows in shocked anger. "Yeah, that's right, I'm talking to you, you fucker."

Stacey scoffs. "Fuck off, Mayfield. Who gave you the right to talk to me like that in my own home?"

"I don't know, probably the same person who made you a fucking skank." There's a chorus of shocked gasps from the crowd around Stacey and it spurs Max on more. "I don't know who you think died and made you Queen, but Dustin Henderson is 10 times the person you are. You're *nothing* compared to him."

Stacey curls her lip at Max. "Well, I thought you were with Lucas Sinclair. I didn't know you were *also* in love with Dustin. Does it take two guys to keep you satisfied, Mayfield?"

"I don't know, you'd know better than I would, from some of the rumors I've heard." Max stops, letting out an overdramatic gasp. She can see Stacey's boyfriend, Chris Post, running back on the Varsity football team, glaring at her. "Oops, I'm sorry, was that supposed to be a secret? Sorry, I forgot not everyone knew what a slut you were."

Chris pushes through the crowd, face red with anger, and looms over Max. He has 6 inches and probably 80 pounds on her. Good thing Max has faced off against scarier things than the walking steroid in front of her. "That's my girlfriend you're talking about, Mayfield. I

don't care if you're a girl, one more word from you and I'll beat you into the ground."

Max grins. "I'd like to see you try, pencil dick."

Chris snarls. "Ok, that's it." He swings at her, but Max is too fast and she ducks, righting herself a second later and delivering a powerful uppercut to the corner of Chris' jaw.

Chris howls with pain and he's upright within seconds, red blossoming on his face from where Max punched him. "Fucking bitch! I'm going to kill you!"

Max lets out a laugh. *Oh, this is gonna be fun.*

God, everything is so hot.

It's just about the only coherent thought left in El's mind. Almost every molecule of her entire being is taken up with *Mike* – the feel of his thighs beneath hers, his hands in her hair, his mouth on her skin, the sound of his breathing, hard and fast, the moans and whimpers that escape from his throat, the taste of him on her tongue.

They're in the backseat of the station wagon, tangled up in each other, El straddling his lap, the feel of him beneath her warm and solid. They trade heavy, open mouthed kisses that set her on fire, their tongues brushing against each other's, teasing each other with the promise of *more*.

El ducks her head and glides her lips across the skin of Mike's jaw, trailing up until she's at his ear so she can nibble on the lobe. It drives him *crazy* and El loves the way he shifts against her, moaning, when she does it. Her hands slide down from his shoulders and across the top of his chest to the buttons of his shirt. She kisses his neck, suckling on the skin, as she frees each button, revealing more and more of his bare skin with each passing second.

With the last button freed, El slides her hands inside Mike's open

shirt, giggling at the way he gasps above her, relishing in the way the muscles of his abdomen jump at her touch. She slides her hands up his torso, feeling each ridge of bone and muscle pass beneath her palms.

Mike shivers when her hands pass over his pecs. “*Fuck*, El,” he says, breathing out the words into the warmth that surrounds them. El just hums as she reaches his shoulders and begins pushing his shirt off and down his arms. Her fingers caress his triceps, his elbows, the backs of his forearms, forcing him to remove his hands from her hair so she can free his upper body of his shirt entirely.

El takes a moment, pulling back, so she can look at Mike in his half-naked glory. He’s just so *beautiful*, skin glowing in the faint light from the streetlamps that pierces through the windows.

“Well, this is unfair. I’m at a distinct disadvantage in the clothing department,” Mike says, voice raspy and low, and grins when she lets out an appreciative whimper.

“Why don’t you do something about it, then?” El says as her lips twist in a teasing smile.

Mike lifts a hand and curls a finger around one of the thin straps of her tank top. “Is that a challenge or an invitation?” he asks. He’s grinning rakishly and *oh my god*.

El swoons a bit, but manages to stay smiling. “That’s up to you to decide,” she says a little more breathlessly than she’d like. But it’s hard to keep control of her breathing when Mike starts trailing a finger along the neckline of her tank top, his touch causing goosebumps to break out along her skin.

“Hmm,” he sighs, fingering the top button of her tank top. “That’s a lot of power for one person to have.” With a quick flick of his thumb and forefinger, he pops the top button. “Whoops.” He frees another button, grinning. “Wow, I’m so sorry.” Another button. “Gosh, I don’t know how this keeps happening.”

El can’t help but roll her eyes even though every inch of her is trembling in anticipation. “Sure you don’t,” she says, gasping as his

finger brushes against the bottom of her sternum while he frees yet another button. When she bought this shirt at the thrift store a few weeks ago, El can't deny she was picturing this *exact* scenario taking place and it's more thrilling than she could have imagined.

"I really don't," Mike says, voice all exaggerated innocence as he reaches the bottom of her tank top, which is now hanging completely open.

With barest brush of her powers, El pushes the straps of her tank top down her shoulders, dropping her arms for just a moment while the garment falls from her upper body.

Mike pouts. "Aww, I wanted to do that."

El giggles, shivering as his hands press against the bare skin of her back. "You were taking too long."

"Hmm, you should make it up to me," Mike says as he leans in.

"What do you want?" El asks, leaning in as well, feeling the gravitational pull of Mike's lips tug her forward.

Mike laughs. "When I figure it out, I'll let you know." In a flash, they're kissing again and his hands are *everywhere*, touching every exposed inch of skin, making her gasp and tremble against him. God, she loves the way he touches her, all warm palms, teasing fingers, and confident caresses.

And then his mouth leaves hers, lips trailing kisses over her chin, down her neck. His teeth scrape across her collarbone, lips moving across the tops of her breasts. El arches her back, his mouth moving lower still and then-

Oh god, yes.

Megan's heart is pounding her chest as she chases after Dustin, pushing through crowds of people, shouting after him as he runs into

the night air. “Dustin, wait!” Her voice sounds too weak to her own ears, even though she’s almost screaming.

God, she could just *kill* Stacey. Or herself. God, she doesn’t even know she’s so *angry*. Angry at Stacey, angry at herself, angry at this stupid party, angry at everything.

She can’t get the image of Dustin’s sad face out of her mind’s eye, even though she’s staring at the back of him as he walks away (*away from her*).

God, why didn’t she stop Stacey? Or interrupt or something? Megan just stood there, face frozen with her stupid smile, as Dustin crumbled in front of her, backing away like he’d been shot. And it took her way too long to move into action, not even saying anything to Stacey as she ran after him, not even thinking about what she’s going to say if she catches him.

Well, you need to figure it out fast, her mind whispers as she reaches him, her hand shooting out to grab his arm, yanking and spinning him around. “Dustin, stop,” she says.

“What?” he asks, voice shaking, eyes a bit red and glassy, tears shining as he looks at her. “You wanted to make fun of me some more?” His voice is a bit slurred – has he been drinking?

Not important. “No, *god* no,” Megan rushes to say. “I wanted to apologize. I’m *sorry*. I’m sorry Stacey’s such a bitch.”

Dustin lets out a laugh and shakes his head. “No, I know I’m not cool enough for you. She was right about that. God, I don’t know what I was thinking, thinking there could be something between us.”

Megan’s heart leaps into her throat. Is he saying...? “No, you’re *wrong*, Dustin. There can be – *there is*.” Her voice is faint, trembling.

He hasn’t heard her, though. “You’re just so beautiful and I’m just such a fucking nerd. God, we might as well be from different *planets*. Guys like me never get the girl, anyway, Mike and El be damned and-”

Megan can’t take this anymore. She steps closer to Dustin and takes

his face in her hands, rising up just enough to kiss him. He smells like pot – *explains the slurred voice* – but Megan doesn't care. His lips are soft against hers, frozen for half a moment before he's kissing her back. It's a little sloppy, either from inexperience or because he's high, but it's still *glorious*. His hands land on her waist after a long moment, holding her close, and everything else fades. Nothing else matters except this moment, his mouth on hers, their arms around each other. And Megan lets herself fall.

All those martial arts lessons are paying off, Lucas realizes through the tipsy haze that surrounds him as he watches Max fight against Chris Post.

He grins as she ducks another punch, her leg kicking out to sweep his legs out from under him. Lucas lets out a cheer as Chris hits the ground. "You got him, babe!" he yells, clapping and whistling.

Max steps back, spares half a moment to grin at him over her shoulder, hair swishing around her shoulders, before she's focused back on Chris. "You gonna stay down, dick weasel? Or do you want to go another round?"

There's a crowd that's formed, everyone cheering and clapping, people screaming "fight, fight, fight!"

And almost all of them are cheering on *his* girlfriend. It's official, Lucas Sinclair is dating the most awesome girl at Hawkins High and he can't stop smiling as he watches her, all fluid self-assurance, stance wide, arms loose at her side, *predatory*.

Lucas shivers. *God, she's so hot.*

Their mouths meet over and over again and Will never wants it to

end.

Kissing Eric is like falling into a warm pool of water, like flying through the air without fear of falling, all thrilling and exciting and *finally*.

God, he understands, now, why Mike and El cannot stop.

And Eric's *hands*.... In Will's hair, on his shoulders, caressing his back, gripping his hips...just *touching* him.

Will's hands are similarly occupied, tracing the shape of the boy he's been staring after for what feels like forever – the lines of his shoulders, the length of his arms, the dip of his waist, the curve of his spine.

Every one of his senses is just overwhelmed and he feels hot, *too hot*. He wants in a way he never knew was possible, in a way that makes him want to throw all caution to the wind.

Eric breaks the kiss, breathing hard, and Will looks up into his face, smiling at the swollen lips, the flushed cheeks.

Eric grins and then they're kissing again, mouths opening against each other, tongues brushing against each other and *oh god*, Will could just do this *forever*, bodies pressed against each other, Eric's warm and solid against his, making Will feel safe and wanted and *desired*.

But then, the sound of panicked shouting outside the door pulls the two of them apart and Will frowns, looking up Eric.

"What was that?"

Kissing Megan is everything Dustin hoped it would be. Her lips are soft against his, her body warm in his arms and, god, she smells so good.

Holy shit, he's kissing Megan Shaughnessy.

Dustin breaks the kiss with a gasp, smiling like a fool, as he looks down at her. She's smiling up at him in return, lips glistening and swollen from their kisses. *He did that*, Dustin realizes with a laugh. "Megan, are you sure?" Stacey's words still echo in his head, though faintly, and it's enough to make him need to make sure.

Megan giggles and Dustin feels his heart soar. "Dustin Henderson, if I weren't sure, would I be kissing you on Stacey's front lawn?"

Dustin laughs again and he's shaking his head with incredulity. "I guess not."

Megan grins and reaches up to tap Dustin's nose with a finger. "Kiss me," she says, voice breathy in a way that makes him shiver.

"As my lady wishes."

And then they're kissing again and Dustin stops thinking.

Until the cops show up, that is.

Really, all Mike needs to be happy for the rest of his life is El pressed up against him like she is right now.

She's sprawled across him, all warm thighs and smooth skin, torso bare beneath his hands and mouth. Her hands are in his hair, fingers curled against his scalp, as she arches against him, offering herself to him in a way that makes his blood boil. He's growing more light-headed by the second as he loses himself in her, in the feel of her body beneath his palms, the taste of her skin on his lips and tongue.

And it's so overwhelming, the way she squirms against him, all whimpering moans and needy gasps. He brushes a hand across her shoulder, pushing her hair behind her back. He lets his hand trail down the naked length of her spine and she curves even further against him, her bare stomach almost pressing against his, as his

hand wraps around her denim-covered hip. His other hand joins it, her hips solidly in his grip, mouth still occupied with mapping the shape of her.

El shifts closer to him, hips surging forward, and Mike helps her, pulling her towards him, her hips meeting his and *fuck, yes*. They move against each other, the car filling with the sounds of their gasps and moans.

This is it, Mike realizes. They're totally going to have sex in the backseat of his car and it's perfect because it's *her* and *him* and that's all that matters because he loves her *so much* and wants her *so bad* and it's them together like it was always meant to be.

God, he can't stop *touching* her, he realizes as his hands move back up the dip of her waist, the curve of her ribcage, and higher still. He *never* wants to stop, either.

He wants *none* of this to stop – the friction of her moving against him, hot and thrilling and *so much better* than he's ever imagined, the sounds that she makes as he touches and kisses her, the warm weight of her on top of him...the way she loves and trusts him to be with her like this, the way she *lets* him. Mike's been given a gift, one he knows he's going to cherish for the rest of his days, and it makes him want to give her *everything*.

And that's when he hears the sound of someone knocking on the window.

Max is breathing hard. "C'mon, man, just stay the fuck down," she says, looking at Chris. He's on the floor, blood streaming from his nose, sweat dripping down his face. He's breathing hard, one hand clutching his rib cage, staring up at her with murder in his eyes.

"I'm going to get you, Mayfield," he says, but it's a weak threat.

"Sure you are, Post, sure you are." She rolls her eyes. "Look, can't

you just admit defeat on this one? I've kicked your ass, like, three times already."

Chris growls, bearing gritted teeth, and he's about to say something when a shout comes from the door. "Alright, this is the police! Break it up, everyone! Party's over!"

It's not the first time Steve's been part of breaking up a high school party, but it's definitely still weird being on this side of the cop/party-goer line.

He's hanging back as Callahan and Jones head into the house, having left Steve to make sure no one flees. Steve's fine with this and he scans the crowd on the front lawn...

...and stops short when he sees Dustin making out with a pretty blonde girl. Steve can't help but grin. *Go Dustin*. Which is probably not the right thought a cop should be having, but, well...Steve's not a perfect cop.

He continues his scan of the front lawn and, just off past the crowd of parked cars, he sees the Wheeler station wagon.

Steve points his flashlight at the car and grins. The windows are all fogged up and he can just make out the shape of *something* moving in the backseat.

Someone's getting frisky, Steve thinks with a cackle as he heads for the vehicle. One of his greatest joys in life is taking Mike Wheeler down a peg or two – even though he loves the kid dearly, Mike takes himself too seriously and it's just too much fun riling him up.

So, Steve's looking forward to interrupting whatever little make out session is going on between Mike and El *just because*. He reaches the car and raises his hand to knock on the window, peering into the backseat so he can see the look on Wheeler's face and-

Oh god.

Steve immediately looks away, taking a step back, eyes clamping shut as if that'll erase what he just saw.

The two of them are shirtless, though all of the crucial parts on El are covered up by Mike Wheeler's *hands and mouth* and oh god, Steve was not prepared for this, was not prepared for the sight of these two teenagers writhing against each other, both of them naked from the waist up. *Especially* when one of them is his *boss' daughter*.

Steve spares a glance up at the heavens, praying for strength, before he reaches out and knocks on the window. Because if he doesn't, then one of the other cops will and, well...Steve doesn't think Mike or El want one of the others catching them. *Especially not Callahan*.

"C'mon, you two, break it up. You should probably get out of the car, while you're at it," he says, loud enough for them to hear.

Even though he's desperately wishing for brain bleach, Steve still has to laugh at the panicked cries that emanate from inside the car, at Mike's muffled "holy shit", at the sound of the two of them scrambling for their clothes. Steve goes around to the back of the station wagon and leans against the trunk to give them a moment.

Not a minute later, the car door opens and Steve glances behind him to see El stumbling out of the backseat, walking over to stand next to him. "Hey, Ellie," he says, scooting over so El can lean against the car next to him. He takes a moment to look at her, grinning all the while. Her cheeks are flushed high across her cheekbones, a flush borne of lust and love, her hair wild and tangled. Her tank top is misbuttoned, gaping in a couple of places, and Steve coughs out a laugh. "Uh, you buttoned your shirt wrong, just so you know," he says, gesturing at her with a wave of his hand

El's eyes widen and she turns away from him, quickly fixing her shirt before facing forward once more.

Steve glances behind him into the car and sees the back of Mike's head as he leans over, hands holding up his head. Steve chuckles. *Probably needs a minute to cool down. Lord knows I would.*

"Hi, Steve," El says, voice quiet, arms crossed over her chest.

Steve smiles. "Having fun at the party?"

El glares at him. "I was until you showed up."

The words make Steve's breath catch in his throat and he lets out a cough. *Ok, this is getting awkward.* "Yeah, sorry about that." He's not sorry, but *still*. A thought occurs to him, a flash of memory of what he just saw rearing its ugly head, and the part of Steve that cares for these kids and wants them to be safe comes to the fore. "So, uh, hey, um...the two of you have protection and shit, right?" El looks at him, eyebrow raised. "Like, condoms or something?"

El rolls her eyes, but she's smiling just a little. Clearly, *she* thinks this is less awkward than he does. "I'm on the Pill. Joyce took me to get a prescription this past summer. Though, I mean, we haven't – at least, not yet, and-" She pauses, looking a little shy. "But, thanks, though."

Something inside Steve lurches a bit. *God, they're growing up.* Still, he smiles. "Good, good." Ok, this is still awkward. "Good talk, kid."

El giggles. "I'm not a kid, Steve."

No, what he just saw in the backseat speaks to *that* well enough and Steve nods. "True, good point." He grins, looking over at her. "So, uh, want to help me round up your friends? Party's getting busted up, so you guys should be getting home."

El smiles and nods. "Ok, good idea."

Yeah, she's a good kid, Steve thinks with a smile. Even though she's not a kid.

No, not a kid. Not for much longer, at any rate.

He laughs and pushes away from the car. "Come on, let's get the others."

The things he does for them, he *swears*.

Well, this sucks, is a thought that Mike has had about once a minute for the last hour or so. *Just the fucking worst.*

Ok, so that's completely hyperbolic and Mike knows it. But, still...

One minute, he's making out with El, every fiber of his being convinced he's about to have sex. Like, *convinced*, 100% ready, *yes the backseat of the station wagon might not be the best place for your first time, but she loves you and you love her and that's all that matters, so let's do this thing.*

And then, the next, Steve Harrington is knocking on the window, scaring the crap out of both him and El, sending them both scrambling for their shirts, the moment over.

Mike spends too long after El gets out of the car trying to calm himself down, disappointment hitting him like a gut punch, blood fizzling with frustration.

It's the frustration that lingers after he feels in control enough to get out of the car, sticking around as he, El, and Steve gather the rest of the Party and shove them into the car so Mike can take them home.

That frustration is still swimming in his veins as he starts the drive to drop everyone off at their respective home. El's sitting next to him, Will on the other side of her, and she's pressed against his side, shifting in her seat every so often, like she's just as uncomfortable in her own skin as he is right now.

Great. Mike's stuck in a car with two friends who are drunk, two friends who are high, and his hot and bothered girlfriend, while he, himself, is just as hot and bothered. *Yeah, this is shaping up to be a hell of a night.*

Still, Mike's half wondering how Will and Dustin ended up high, but the two of them are giggling messes, Will's hair all messed up and Dustin looking all moon-eyed. Directly behind Mike, Lucas and Max are drunkenly and messily making out in the backseat.

Mike shakes his head. *Our friends are a mess, El*, he says to her. Their

mental connection so comes in handy, sometimes.

El breathes out a silent laugh and Mike feels the way her body shakes against him. *Yeah, but we love them.* She reaches out and lays her hand on top of his, which is resting in her knee. *I'm sorry about earlier, by the way – getting interrupted.*

Mike sucks in a sharp breath and tries not to groan. *Yeah, me too.* He spares a moment to look over at her, giving her a small smile, and is rewarded with the tiniest uptick of her lips.

The rest of the drive is silent as, one by one, Mike drops off first Lucas, then Dustin, and then Max. Then it's just Mike, El, and Will in the car and, sooner than expected, Mike's pulling up to the Hopper-Byers household.

Will's half-asleep and El grabs ahold of the arm that's closest to her. "C'mon Will, let's get you inside."

"Hmm, 'k," he breathes.

As Mike watches, El opens the passenger door with her powers. And, before she starts to help push Will out of the car, she turns and smiles at Mike. "Wait here until I get back," she says, her smile more of a grin.

Mike lets out a laugh. "Why?"

El's eyes are twinkling. "I want to say goodbye without an audience," she says. "I'm just going to get Will up to his room and make sure everyone else is asleep." She leans over and presses a soft kiss to the corner of his mouth. "I'll let you know if the coast is clear."

Mike laughs again in incredulity at the mischief that pitches her voice and he's a bit confused. "Ok," he says. "I'll wait here."

El smiles, the expression wide and toothy, and then she's pushing Will out of the car. "C'mon, Will, let's get you into bed..."

Mike watches, smile on his face, shaking his head a bit, as El guides Will up the porch stairs and inside the house. *God, he loves her.* He really does, just loves *everything* about her. El's amazing – nice and

caring and smart and funny and beautiful and, really, Mike could go on for *days* about all the things he loves about her.

And he's going to spend the rest of his life with her figuring out all the ways he loves her, figuring out all the ways she loves him – both old and new.

Including, hopefully, making love to her someday.

Mike sighs as he lets his thoughts focus on this. It's the one part of their relationship they haven't talked about and, after the night they've had, Mike thinks they should. Sure, they've talked around sex, but not *about* it. And, really, they need to. Things between them just seem to *escalate* so quickly every time now, over these past few months – since their first official date, really, if Mike's being specific about it. It's like the air between them is filled with a heady, intoxicating combination of love, lust, and *need* that just takes over them every time they're alone together.

It didn't used to be like this, Mike thinks. And it wasn't when they were younger, when they were still 13 and 14. But now, they're almost 17 and just...he *needs* her like he needs air and, even though he loves her with everything he has, it's so *distracting*, like all he can think of is *her* and the two of them together with nothing between them, completely skin to skin.

El's mental voice interrupts his thoughts and Mike smiles, grateful for the distraction. *Hey, everyone's asleep. Be down in a sec.*

The front door opens moments later and a jacket-less El walks outside, steps graceful and purposeful as she walks down the porch stairs. Mike watches her every move, waiting for her to come around to the passenger side and slide in next to him...

...Only she goes to *his* side, opening the driver's door and clambering in, effortlessly straddling his thighs like she had earlier that night, door closing behind her.

Mike grins. "And what do you think you're doing?" he asks even as his hands go to her hips. *Like he doesn't know.*

El smiles coquettishly and Mike can tell she's biting the inside of her cheek to keep from smiling even wider. "Wanted to finish what we started."

Mike snorts out a laugh. "What happened to saying goodbye?"

El shakes her head, tossing her hair over her shoulder, and loses control of her smile. "I lied."

Mike lets out a shocked gasp, completely overdramatic. "*El*, how *could* you?"

El scoots closer to him, gaze flicking down to glance at his lips, and Mike groans. "Oh, I'm sure I'll figure out a way to make it up to you." And then she's kissing him and it's like they hadn't stopped.

Yeah, this'll do. It's not long until they're back to where they were earlier, bodies pressed together, shirts cast aside.

Mike pulls his mouth away from her lips and begins pressing soft kisses against El's neck. "We should probably talk about this," Mike says, breathlessly, panting the words. God, *why* is he talking right now?

"Mmm, later," El breathes out. "Raincheck?" She giggles at the word and Mike finds himself laughing against her neck. El's love of idioms and turns of phrase grows all the time and she loves it when she gets to use one, which means Mike loves it too.

Still, she seems to know what he's referring to because she continues. "Other things we can do, right now, though," she says, using her bare shoulder to nudge Mike's head until he lifts it. El takes the opportunity to kiss him and Mike grins against her lips, the both of them groaning. *Other things, indeed.*

And later, much later, once he's home, Mike's still smiling, feeling like he's the one who's drunk *and* high – drunk on her, high on the feeling of the two of them together, moments of their night echoing around in his head as he heads to shower before bed.

(the sound of her cries filling the car, their bodies shifting and moving against each other, the feel of her arching against him, all soft, bare skin

*beneath his touch, the lines of her body going taut under his palms as she crests and breaks against him, pulling him along right behind her moments later, her mouth on his as they draw in gulps of air, breathing slowing, calming – together, always **together**)*

So, they don't end up having sex in his car, but it's a near thing. *Everything but*, Mike thinks as he crawls into bed a bit later. *Rounding third base is not bad.*

And when El pulls him into the Void moments later, immediately snuggling up beside him, limbs tangling, Mike smiles and holds her close.

It's only a matter of time before they slide home.

Production of "Romeo and Juliet" is at the point where the Drama Club starts needing to run weekend rehearsals and Dustin can't say he's not nervous as he heads into the Drama Club room on a Sunday afternoon.

He hasn't seen Megan since they got separated at Stacey's party when the cops came to bust the party. There had been no time to really talk about what was happening between them and now Dustin feels like he doesn't know which way is up. He'd been high and she'd been drinking and...are they both really sure? Dustin knows he is, but Megan...

So it's a bit disappointing when Dustin walks into the Drama Club room and Megan's *not* there. In fact, once again, Dustin's the only person in the room and he sighs. *Great.*

He heads over for his usual chair, backpack sliding from one arm to land on the floor, and he sits down, leaning his head back and closing his eyes. He knows he should run lines, but....

Dustin gets lost in thought, lost in his own head and so is completely startled at the feel of a hand on his shoulder. He flails a bit, startled

back to the present, and lifts his head, opening his eyes to see-

-Megan.

She's smiling at him from where she's sitting next to him, hair pulled back in a ponytail. "Hi," she says, smiling shyly, cheeks blushing prettily.

Dustin finds himself smiling in return. "Megan, hi," he responds, sounding breathless. "So, um, how are-

Megan cuts him off as she leans over and kisses him. *Oh, ok, guess that answers that question*, Dustin realizes as he kisses her back. It feels as good, if not *better* than it did on Friday night and Dustin can't help the way his breath catches in his throat.

Megan pulls back a few seconds later, biting her lip as she smiles at him, like she's trying to contain the full force of the expression.

Dustin laughs. "Well, now we don't need to practice kissing for the play."

His words pull a loud laugh from Megan and, *god*, she's beautiful when she laughs. "True," she says, shaking her head with mirth. "So, any regrets yet?"

"None. You?"

Megan winks and Dustin feels his heart skip a beat. "I'll let you know if I have any. Doesn't feel like a possibility, though," she says, voice lilting and teasing.

Dustin lets out a laugh and he pulls Megan in for another kiss. There's still a bit of time before other people begin walking in and, well...

Talking's overrated.

The Art classroom is half filled when Will walks in on Monday after school. People are starting new projects, sketching on canvas and butcher paper. Will can't help but smile, even though he's a little disappointed not to see Eric there.

He hasn't seen the other boy since the party and it's been killing Will, having to wait to talk to him.

But, Eric's not here and it's not worth worrying about for the time being.

So, Will goes through the motions of getting ready to get started on his next project – setting up his station, gathering paints, picking a blank canvas. It sucks him in, the anticipation of creating filling him, so it's a surprise when he looks just off to his left to see Eric standing there, a small smile on his face.

"Hey, Will," Eric says. "Anyone using the station next to you?"

Will's heart leaps into his throat and he smiles. "Nope. Well, I guess you are now, if you want."

Eric lets out a laugh and puts down his things – a blank canvas, a sketchbook, a few charcoal pencils. "Thanks."

The air between them is filled with delicious tension that makes Will grin despite himself.

And, when Eric leans over about 20 minutes later, and whispers, "Meet me in supply closet around the corner after we're done?", Will grins.

"Got a better idea," Will says. "Meet me in the parking lot when we're done. There's somewhere else we can go."

Later, Will meets Eric in the parking lot, all giddy butterflies swarming inside his stomach as he climbs into Eric's car, and gives him directions to his house. Later still, once it's just the two of them in Castle Byers, lips meeting, hands exploring, Will feels like he's been set free. Even though he knows he still has to hide this, knows that a sleepy, small town like Hawkins isn't ready for who Will *really* is, he still can have this. And it's more than he could have *ever*

dreamed of.

Notes for the Chapter:

Alright, *next* chapter is Lumax drama, I promise!

Also, feel free to hit me up on tumblr! I'm @fatechica and I love having people come poke me :)

26. Dec 1987

Notes for the Chapter:

Yay, I finished this! I've been up for 19 hours, but dammit, I finished it!

So, really, this chapter is entirely comprised of Lumax drama and Mileven trying their damndest to move things to the next phase of their relationship. Again, nothing explicit, but...teenagers man....

Dec 1987

It starts off as a normal Saturday night date: dinner at Pizza Palace where they snuggle up in a booth and occasionally feed each other bites of their pepperoni pizza; movie at the Hawk to see “*batteries not included”, only to spend half the movie making out in the back row (*hard kisses, roaming hands, above clothes, **under clothes, oh god***).

From there, it's a furious make out session in the backseat of his car, parked just down the way from her house. Her shirt goes first, then his, and then her bra, all tossed aside to land on the floor so they can be pressed together from hip to shoulder, skin to skin.

(This is how it starts to go wrong.)

God, he *loves* this, loves the feel of her against him, her mouth on his, her hands on him, the softness of her beneath his palms. He loves the way she moves against him, insistent and knowingly – she's a woman who knows what she wants and knows how to get it.

She grins against his lips when she moves in just the right way to draw a low moan from him. He retaliates by feathering his fingers against the curve of her ribcage, which makes her giggle, before sliding his hand further up to press against the curve of her (*soft, warm, yes*). Her giggle morphs into a sigh and it hits him, like it's hit him thousands of times before.

(Here it goes.)

“I love you.”

The words are spoken – no, *whispered* – against her lips, an exhalation that sets his heart pounding even harder in his chest. It’s the same way his heart pounds when he sees her anew each day, when she smiles at him *just so*, when she slips her hand into his and squeezes.

She stills against him, pulling back just enough to look down at him, and-

“What the fuck?”

Lucas pulls back, feeling his brow furrow, feeling himself start to frown. “What do you mean, ‘what the fuck’?”

Max stares down at him, her face slack with what Lucas can only assume is shock – it’s a strange juxtaposition, the turned-on flush on her cheeks draped over the way the rest of her skin pales. Her breathing, once overrun with passion, turns sharp – like she’s *angry* – bare breasts brushing against his chest in a way that was erotic seconds ago and is now causing him concern.

“What did you mean, Max?” Lucas asks, repeating himself. Concern is rapidly fading to hurt – *why won’t she say it back?* – but, suddenly, she’s moving, scrambling off his lap to grab her discarded clothes. Lucas reaches for her, tries to pull her back to him. “Max, wait-”

“I can’t,” she says, cutting him off. She slips into her shirt, but is holding her bra in one hand, winter jacket in the other, and she fumbles with the car door handle for half a moment before she opens it. Cold air spills into the cab, causing Lucas to shiver, but he’s sliding out behind her, his own shirt still on the ground in the backseat, as he rushes after her.

“Max, hold on!” he calls out, shivering as the early December air hits his bare chest. But she’s not slowing down. If anything, Max is speeding up. “Max!”

“Go away!” she calls over her shoulder, hair streaming behind her like fire in the night.

“No, not until you tell me what’s wrong!” Lucas catches up to her and

manages to grab her by the wrist, spinning her around to face him. "Max, *talk to me.*"

She looks at him, glances down at his chest, and frowns. "You're gonna freeze," Max says, voice hard.

"I don't care!" Lucas all but yells. "What's going on with you? Is it because I said I love you?"

Max yanks her hand from his grip and folds her arms over her chest, defensive. "No," she scoffs, looking anywhere but him.

"I'm not sorry," Lucas says. "I mean, I didn't meant to spring it on you, but I mean it, ok? Maybe that wasn't the right moment, but I *mean it.*" He pauses, taking in a deep breath. "I love you."

Max gasps, breath choking in her throat, like a sob she's catching at the very last minute. "You can't," she says.

"I don't need you to say it back," Lucas says in a rush, like he's trying to stay one step ahead of whatever crazy logic is going on inside her brain. "It's ok if you don't love me back." *It's not, but he says it anyway.* "I don't mind." *A lie.* "Just...talk to me. *Please.*"

There's a long moment, chill biting at his bare skin, the two of them standing there with locked gazes and squared shoulders. He'll stand there all night, as long as it takes for her to say something.

But, then Max speaks. And Lucas regrets it.

"I don't love you," Max says, her lips pressed together in a thin line, her arms tense at her side.

It *hurts*, more than Lucas can say, feeling like someone is trying to gouge out his heart with a melon spoon. But then, he notices it: the way she shifts from foot to foot, the cast of her eyes – Max is *lying*.

He narrows his eyes, glaring at her. "You're such a fucking liar," he says, gritting his teeth. The hurt and confusion inside of him fuel his frustration, turning into the nastiest kind of anger

Max's cheeks flush again beneath the night of the streetlamps.

“Excuse me?”

“Yeah, you heard me,” Lucas said. He’s in for it now and he’s *not* backing down. “You’re a fucking liar. What, not brave enough to tell me the truth straight to my face?”

Max glares at him. “You know what? Fuck you, Lucas.”

“Fuck me? No, fuck *you*, Max,” Lucas spits back at her. “You *always* do this. Whenever things get too hard or too real, you always *walk away* like a goddamn coward.” Max goes still in a way that sets alarm bells off in the back of Lucas’ head, but he’s on a tear and he can’t stop now. “Why can’t you open up like a normal girl, huh? Why do you always have to make things so *difficult*?” Lucas hears the words right after they leave his mouth and he suddenly feels sick to his stomach. *No, wait....*

Max raises a fist like she’s going to hit him and Lucas flinches in anticipation. Max flinches too, her eyes widening just a bit, and Lucas watches as she lowers her fist, her whole body trembling. She takes in a deep breath, like she’s trying to get some measure of control, but her anger doesn’t abate any at all. “A normal girl, huh? Is that what you want? God, I’m so sorry, I didn’t know you were *putting up* with me this entire fucking time.”

Lucas’ breath catches in his throat and his anger surges once more. “Dammit, Max, don’t put words in my mouth! That’s not-”

“*No*,” Max says, cutting him off. “You don’t get to weasel your way out of this.” She pauses, letting out an incredulous laugh. “God, you never know when to give up, do you? You just have to push and push and *push*. Well, I’m sorry I’m not *perfect* at relationships like you are, Lucas. I’m sorry I don’t do things on *your* timeline. I’m sorry you’ve *wasted your time* on me.” She shakes her head. “I can’t do this anymore.”

Max turns and begins walking away. Lucas’ heart shatters in his chest. “So, what, this is it, then? You’re just *giving up*?” His heart is breaking and he’s still angry, still *yelling*. God, why is he doing this?

“*Go away!*” Max yells.

There's a lump in his throat that he forces down into his stomach.
"Fine, I don't need you!"

"Well, I don't need you, either!"

"Good!"

"*Good!*"

And then she's gone and Lucas is left standing in the middle of the night, half naked, full broken-hearted, wondering how and when everything went so wrong.

The explosion-implosion of Max and Lucas' relationship leaves the party hanging in what feels like the cruelest of limbos. They're not together, but they're not broken up, they're just...stuck. Stuck in uncertainty, stuck caring about each other, but being too angry, too *hurt* to see through it to some sort of resolution.

(should i stay or should i go now)

And it's *beyond* awkward for the rest of the Party.

Max and Lucas spend the rest of their weekend in sulking isolation (Max kicking the shit out of a punching bag that hangs in a corner in the garage, Lucas staring morosely at the wall – neither of them talking, not to each other, not to *anyone else*).

So it's a complete and utter surprise for the rest of the Party on Monday morning to discover that a full third of the Party is at odds with each other (which is putting it mildly, *really*). And none of the rest of them know what to do.

It takes a little bit, at first, to realize something is wrong.

Mike picks Will and El up for school, swinging by to grab Dustin on his way in. Lucas usually picks up Max, because they sometimes (read: *almost always*) park in the furthest spot away from the school

and make out before they are forcibly separated for Homeroom.

So, this morning – this fine and not at all normal Monday Morning of the last week before Winter Break – finds Dustin, Will, Mike, and El waiting outside for the other couple of the group, all four of them bundled up against the cold.

El's tucked under one of Mike's arms, her arms wrapped around him to leech his warmth from him, head pressed against his shoulder, and she smiles over at Dustin. "Hey, where's Megan?"

Dustin and Megan have only been dating for about a month, now, and the Party is still getting used to incorporating a new kind-of-member. Like, Megan's not a *full* member – and, to be fair, the price of admission to becoming a full member is fighting off against Demodogs or closing portals to alternate dimensions, so.... – but she's dating Dustin and, really, they were going to have to figure out how to handle this eventually. Like, making sure they censor any reference to the Upside Down and Demodogs and government conspiracies and El's powers (they've almost slipped up almost a half a dozen times and it's only been a *month*). Eventually, maybe, if Megan looks like she's in it for the long haul, they'll let her in on all the secrets and the fire-forged bonds that tie them together.

But that day is not today. So, Dustin smiles and shrugs a bit at El's question (the fact that he has a girlfriend is something he's still very proud and ecstatic about). "Her family went on winter vacation early, so they're up in Vermont until after New Year's."

El pouts a little. "Aww, you won't get to see her at all Winter Break. That sucks."

Dustin chuckles and the sound is a little sad, but he's still smiling. "Yeah, but now we don't have to worry about accidentally freaking Megan out when you levitate something or change the radio station with your powers for a few weeks."

Still, El feels a little bad for Dustin. She likes Megan and she likes that Megan and Dustin are together and she's happy for Dustin, happy that he has someone kind of like she has Mike.

Beside her (*speak of the devil*), Mike lets out a chuckle. "I still can't get over the fact that you're with Megan Shaughnessy now."

Will rolls his eyes and breathes out a laugh. "That's because you think it's weird since you had a crush on her in 5th grade."

El smirks and pokes Mike in the ribs, digging her finger in as best she can through the layers of his jacket. "Having regrets? Starting to think maybe you picked the wrong girl?" She's teasing – everyone knows it – and she expects a teasing response in return ("Maybe, you think we'd be cute together?").

But Mike flips the script this time and he bends his head to press a kiss to the top of her head. "I could never regret you. You're perfect for me," he says, voice soft and sweet in the way that just makes her melt.

So, of course, El has to pull Mike down for a kiss that, a kiss that goes from sweet to heated in an instant-

*(it's like this **all the time**, now. it only takes the barest touch of his lips to hers to set off a cascade of fireworks just under the surface of her skin, to make her want to touch him and be with him in all the ways they've been exploring over the past few weeks. her desire for him lives just a heartbeat away and it's the most exciting thing she's ever experienced.)*

-so of course they're interrupted by the sounds of Dustin and Will pretending to throw up.

"God, you guys *need* to get a goddamn room," Dustin says. "Just take that shit where no one else can see it, *please*."

"Count yourself lucky you don't see them all over your own *house*," Will says.

"Hey," El says. "It was my house first."

Will sticks out his tongue. "Well, it's my house, too, now. So *there*."

Mike rolls his eyes. "Real mature, you two."

"But you love us and you know it," El says, grinning as she looks

back up at him.

Mike smiles down at her. “Yeah, I do,” he says in a way that makes it clear he’s mostly talking about *her*.

This is the moment when Lucas shows up, huddled in his winter coat, shoulders slumped like the weight of the world is pulling him down.

El looks around at the rest of the group and they’re all staring at each other, eyebrows raised, foreheads wrinkling, frowns beginning to pull down at lips.

“Uh, hey, Lucas,” Will says as Lucas approaches. “Everything ok?”

“Yeah,” El says. “And where’s Max? Doesn’t she usually catch a ride with you?”

Lucas shrugs. “She had something else to do this morning,” Lucas says, words half mumbled. And everyone *immediately* knows it’s a lie. He won’t meet any of them in the eyes and the way he’s hunched over in on himself speaks to something really, *really* wrong.

None of them push it, though. *When he’s ready, he’ll come to us*, El thinks.

But their first clue comes when Max eventually shows up a few minutes later. Conversation has resumed among the now group of 5, though Lucas’ contributions are mainly contained to non-committal grunts and one word answers.

And then Max shows up...and keeps walking right on past them, sparing only the barest of glances at them before rushing away to head inside. And none of them miss the way Lucas’ face goes just *stony* – lips pressed together, eyes narrowed, jaw tight.

El looks up at Mike really quickly. *I’ll follow, go see what’s wrong. You talk to Lucas*, she tells him as she leans up for one last quick kiss.

Ok, see you in homeroom. Love you.

Love you, too.

El slips away and rushes after Max, keeping her eyes peeled for the distinctive head of copper hair, wondering all the while just what the hell is going on.

Mike watches El go, feeling the distance between them stretch like a taut thread, before he turns back to Lucas. He can't lie – he's concerned. Lucas looks both like someone kicked his puppy and angry enough to kick something all at the same time.

Mike shares a quick look with Will and Dustin before he licks his lips and speaks. "Hey, Lucas, is, um...is everything ok with you and Max? Did something happen?"

Lucas lets out a nasty scoff and just shakes his head. "No, *nothing* happened. That's the problem," he says before he stalks off, a cloud of anger and hurt radiating from every inch of him, leaving the Mike, Dustin, and Will behind.

After a few seconds, Dustin lets out a shaky sigh. "Oh man, you guys don't think Lucas and Max broke up, do you?"

Mike scoffs almost immediately. "No, *no*, that's insane. They've been together *forever*, like-

"For as long as you and El have," Will says, cutting Mike off. "What, three years now?"

Three years, Mike thinks absently. *Has it only been three years?* God, he barely remembers what his life was like before El – it's like she's been a part of him for his entire life.

Maybe she was, maybe she was just waiting for you to find her.

And, for almost as long, it feels like, Lucas and Max have been just as together. Maybe not to the same level of over-the-top dedication like Mike and El have been, but, still, *together* in a way that Mike has come to rely on as part of the fabric of the tapestry of everyday life.

What's this going to mean for the Party?

It's a sobering thought, one Mike's never faced before. Lucas and Max not being together is not a thing Mike's thought about before. The dynamics of the Party have been set in stone for *years*. What do they do now, if Lucas and Max are no longer a couple? Whose side do they take? Do they even *take* sides? Is this going to fracture them down the middle? No, *no*, Mike won't let it. He just *won't*.

"That's not a good frown, Michael," Dustin says.

The words shake Mike out of his thoughts and he looks over at Dustin with incredulous confusion. "There's such thing as a *good* frown?"

Will lets out a sigh. "What are you thinking, Mike? You had that look on your face."

Mike looks between Will and Dustin, sees that they're both looking to him for guidance, for *leadership* – hopeful eyes, yearning faces, *please fix it like only you can*.

Mike sighs, feeling the familiar weight settle across his shoulders. *Ever the Paladin, leading the way and saving the day. Like always.*

"Well, first, we need to figure out what's going on," Mike says. "And then we need to fix it, *whatever* happened."

El catches up to Max at the other girl's locker and, before Max has even had a chance to open, El grabs her by the arm.

"A/V room, *now*," El says as she drags Max away.

"El, wait, *stop*." Max struggles under El's grip, trying to get away.

But El doesn't let her and drags Max steadily through the hallway, subtly using her powers to keep Max moving forward. They get to the A/V room and, with a quick flick of her powers to unlock the door, El opens the door and pushes Max inside.

It's only when the door is shut and locked behind her that El lets Max go. "Ok, talk to me."

Max crosses her arms over her chest, glaring at El. "You know, you're being a real bitch this morning. Wheeler leave you high and dry last night, or something?" She smirks. "You really need to tell that boy that it's only fair if *both* of you come."

El glares in return. "Oh, ha, ha," she deadpans. "No, something is wrong. *Spill it.*"

Max holds the glare and, for a moment, there's a tense silence. But El's the strongest willed of them all and, eventually, Max looks away. Her arms drop, her shoulders slump, and it's like the fight's gone out of her. And that's when El notices it: too pale skin, eyes with traces of red-rimmed and puffy lids. Max has been *crying*. Not, like, in the last hour or anything. But *recently*.

"Max," El breathes. "Tell me, *please.*" Her heart's starting to hurt and El just needs to know so she can make it better, so she can make things go back to the way they used to be.

Max squares her shoulders and looks back up, but there's a slight tremble that pulls at Max's lips that makes El worry. "I...I think Lucas and I broke up."

El can't help the way she gasps – more like the shock forces the air out of her – and she steps forward to lay a hand on Max's arm, comforting and warm. "What happened?"

Max crosses her arms over her chest in a tight hug and she looks away just slightly, her brow furrowed, teeth emerging to bite down on her lower lip. "We got in a fight and I just – I couldn't and I-" Max cuts off sharply, lips clamping together as she attempts to get control of herself.

El takes another slow step forward, like Max is a woodland creature who'll bolt if she's spooked. "What was the fight about?" she says, voice low and gentle, *calming*.

Max sucks in a sharp breath and she shakes her head. Tears shine in

her eyes and El's heart cracks a little at the sight. "I...I can't right now, El. I'm sorry, but-" She snuffles, barely holding it together.

So El steps forward and wraps her arms around Max, feeling how tense she is as El holds her tight. "It's ok," El says. "You don't have to say anything until you're ready. I'm sorry for pushing."

And, just like that, all the tension coiled up along the length of Max's spine, stretching along her shoulders, *disappears*, leaving her sagging against El. Her arms wrap around El in return and the two girls are hugging, El trying to impart *any* level of comfort to a Max who's now trembling a bit in El's arms.

"What am I going to do, Ellie?" Max says, her voice muffled from where her face is pressed against the shoulder of El's jacket. "Everyone's going to be so mad at me and they'll kick me out of the Party."

El shakes her head. "No, I won't let that happen. Besides, why wouldn't they kick out Lucas instead?" El knows it's a stupid question – Lucas has been a Party member since before either girl arrived. "Anyway, you're our friend, Max, *and* a Party member. And that's forever."

Max sniffs and pulls back a little, wiping at her eyes. There are no tear tracks on her skin, so she'd been able to keep the tears contained well enough. But, *still*. "Thanks, El," Max says with a sad laugh. "C'mon, we should get to Homeroom."

El frowns a bit, concerned. "You sure you're ok enough?"

Max smiles and, though the expression doesn't reach her eyes, El takes it as *something* – progress, a sign, *anything*. "Yeah. I mean, I'm not going to go *skipping* through the hallways, or anything. But I'm not about to fall apart, either."

El nods and smiles back. "Alright, let's go, then."

So, it seems like Lucas and Max have broken up.

The words are whispered into Mike's mind on his way to Homeroom and he frowns, his worst suspicions confirmed. *Dammit.*

He hears El's mental sigh as he walks into Homeroom where she and Max are already sitting. *Yeah. Max won't tell me what happened, but it sounds like they got into a fight about something.*

Mike slides into his normal seat next to El and glances over at Max. Even he can see she's had a bad weekend – pale skin, red eyes, lips drawn in a tight line – and it worries him. Because Max is one of them just as much as Lucas is and when one of them is hurting, *all* of them are. They've been through too much together for anything less. "Hey, Max," he says, trying not to sound too pitying. He knows Max would *hate* that.

Max looks over and gives him a humorless smile. "Hey, Mike," she says, mumbling a bit, not fully meeting his gaze.

Mike shares a look with El. *Maybe you should have lunch with her today. Maybe take Will with you? I don't want her to feel alone.*

El's lips twitch in a quick, small smile. *Yeah, was thinking of that myself. She's worried about getting kicked out of the Party and everyone being mad at her.*

Mike keeps himself from outwardly frowning, but it's disconcerting to hear. *That's ridiculous,* he says as the final bell rings. *Why would we kick her out of the Party?*

El gives a mental shrug that Mike feels along the back of his neck (god, that's a little weird sometimes). *I don't know. Just count me as glad we won't go through something like this.*

Please, Mike says with a mental laugh, trying to keep his face straight as their Homeroom teacher takes attendance. *You can practically read my mind and throw me across the room. You're like the coolest person I know. Why would I even think of making us going through something like this?*

He looks at her out of the corner of his eye and is pleased to see her

fighting a smile. Aww, *and here I thought you loved me for my hands.*

Mike's breath catches in his throat and he feels his cheeks heat up with memory.

(hands cool against his bare torso, trailing a shivering path down to the waist of his jeans, both of them breathing hard as her fingers undo his belt buckle, his whole world boiling down to her hands, her sneaky, nimble hands...)

Mike lets out a cough and shifts a bit in his seat. *Can you **not** while we're sitting in class? I'd like to be able to think.*

Thinking's overrated, El says and Mike dares to look over at her, seeing her look back at him, the heat in her eyes making him want to drag her out of this room and take her somewhere where they can be alone.

It's ridiculous how often this happens these days, how often he just wants to *drown* in her and never come up for air. He just wants her so bad, it's dizzying.

You're gonna destroy me one of these days, Mike says with a shake of his head.

*You say that like you haven't already destroyed **me**.*

School is awkward that week. Max and Lucas aren't talking, so the rest of the Party recombines themselves in strange ways – El, Will, and Max vs Mike, Lucas, and Dustin one time; El, Dustin, Lucas vs Max, Mike, and Will the next; and so on. Always split evenly, always in different combinations. No one wants to take sides and no one wants Lucas or Max to feel left out.

But it's straining the rest of the group and, by Wednesday, Mike's already had enough.

He's in the A/V room Wednesday afternoon – El has Dance Club and

he's waiting for her as usual (seeing her in those leggings is so much more appealing now that he knows what she feels like *beneath* them). But he's got at least an hour until she's out, so he has time to kill.

So, while he waits, he fiddles with a broken receiver. The wiring blew on it a couple of weeks ago and Mike's taking it as a personal challenge to see if he can fix it.

The casing is set off to one side, exposing the guts of the electronics. On the table nearby, he's got wire cutters, a couple of small screwdrivers, and spare wiring. *Alright, let's see what we can do about this.*

For a bit, Mike loses himself in the work, letting it distract him from everything. And, of course, his mind starts to wander. His thoughts touch on El – wait, let's be real here: his thoughts touch on the part of his mind that is *always* thinking about El – and, for a moment, he just lets himself think about how much he loves her, basks in that feeling.

Too bad Lucas and Max aren't in the same place, right now, his thoughts chime in a few moments later.

And, so, with his hands tangled in the innards of an old, probably broken beyond repair receiver, Mike lets himself think about Max and Lucas, about what in the hell the rest of the Party is going to do.

As far as Mike can tell, Lucas and Max haven't spoken in days, not since whatever happened between them *happened*. Mike scowls a bit at the thought. How are they supposed to get out of this strange limbo if they won't *talk* to each other?

This solves nothing, Mike thinks, frowning. Lucas and Max are both stubborn, he knows this, but it's not like he and El aren't stubborn, either.

You don't see us not talking to each other when we fight. Except, Mike and El don't fight – not really, at least. Sure, they bicker sometimes (*sometimes, he starts them bickering on purpose – he likes the way her cheeks flush, the way her eyes sparkle, the way her shoulders straighten and pull back, like she's preparing for battle – yeah, it's kind of hot*), but

they don't really *fight*.

But, even if they did, Mike knows how he and El operate – they would talk it out. Because they talk *everything* out, even if it's uncomfortable. It's just who they are.

So, the question remains: how does he get Max and Lucas to talk when they won't even agree to be in the same room with each other?

It's this question that's bouncing around in his brain when the door to the A/V room opens and Matt Huxley walks in.

Mike grins. "Hey, kiddo, what's up?"

Matt narrows his eyes just a bit in annoyance, barely enough for Mike to notice, but he's all smiles regardless. "Hey, Mike. Whatcha working on?" Matt leaves the door open as he enters the room and flops down into the chair next to Mike, face alight with curiosity.

"Trying to see if I can fix this receiver. Where's the rest of your... Band of Brothers?" Mike almost calls them "the Baby Nerds", which is what Dustin calls them to their faces all the time and what Mike secretly calls them in his head. But he knows how much they hate it and, well, since he just called Matt "kiddo"...he figures he can afford to be benevolent.

"Ooh, cool," Matt says as he looks at the exposed wiring. Mike smiles at the excitement. Really, he likes the kid, though if Matt could stop staring at El like the sun shines out of her ass quite so much, that would be *fantastic*. Mike gets it, he really does, but still....

Regardless, there's something endearing about Matt, something that sparks a fierce wave of protectiveness in Mike. Maybe it's because Mike looks at Matt and sees a reflection of himself – small, awkward, searching for belonging, trying to navigate life without a clue of what the hell he was doing, but being the leader of your friends, having people rely on you anyway.

Could also be because the kid is barely over 5 foot. Mike holds back a laugh. Matt Huxley is a tiny, sandy haired boy with more freckles than Mike, if that's possible, and Mike could fit him in his pocket,

Matt's so tiny.

"Oh, and the others should be here in a bit," Matt continues. His face falls a bit and Mike knows what's going to happen before it does. "Um, can I ask you something?"

Mike shrugs one shoulder, smiling sobering a bit in return. "Sure, what's up?"

Matt looks away, like he's trying to think of what exactly he wants to say, before he meets Mike's gaze. "Um, what happened with Max and Lucas?"

Mike lets out a humorless laugh. "Noticed that, did you?"

"Well..." Matt sighs. "We noticed you guys weren't eating lunch together this week."

"It's why you four have been steering clear, isn't it?" Usually, the Baby Nerds join the Party for lunch when their schedules align. But, Mike's seen the foursome sitting on their own in the cafeteria, watching both halves of the Party with confusion.

Matt nods. "Yeah, we didn't want to get involved but..."

"But you're worried," Mike says, sighing. "Not going to lie, we are too."

"So, what happened?" Matt asks.

Mike blows out a sharp breath through his lips, cheeks puffing out as a result. "Well, you see-"

"Hey, did you ask him yet?" It's the voice of Owen Ferguson, the nerdiest of the four (and that's saying something...).

Mike watches as the rest of the Baby Nerds walk into the room, a cacophony of sound following in their wake. He looks back over at Matt's face as the group files into the room, sitting down in empty chairs, dropping backpacks onto the ground, and has to hold back a laugh at the way Matt blushes and glares. "I was *getting* there, Owen. He was just about to tell me."

Oh, god.... It's weird, being amused and exasperated at the same time, but somehow, Mike's achieved it. *I finally understand how Steve feels.*

"Oh," Bryan says. "So, what's up with Max and Lucas?"

The looks on everyone's faces as they look over at Mike is full of excitement, curiosity, and concern. *They just want to be let in on the secret.* And, for what feels like the thousandth time, Mike realizes these kids look up to him and he wonders who decided that he should have the privilege of kids looking up to him like he's *cool*.

Someone made a mistake with that one, Mike thinks. But he just shakes his head and speaks. "Well, you see, it's like this...." So he explains what he knows, which, admittedly, isn't much; the rest of the Party still doesn't know why Max and Lucas aren't speaking to each other despite all attempts to figure this out so far.

There's a bit of a silence as the Baby Nerds absorb this information.

Then Sean speaks and it sparks off a whole *thing*. "Well, what you need to do is lock them in a room and refuse to let them out until they talk to each other," Sean says with all the wisdom a 14 year old can muster.

Mike cringes – god he'd had that thought sometime within the past hour and it sounds so *dumb* coming out of Sean's mouth that he almost wishes he could go back in time and smack his past self in the face. "I don't think-

"No," Bryan says with a maniacal grin. "Max will kill whoever does that. What you gotta do is *this*." He then goes on to explain a complicated plot where they make Max and Lucas think the other is in danger and the other *has* to save them to make them realize just how much they care about each other and miss each other. "...it's perfect," Bryan finishes.

"But, how are you going to *convince* them the other's in danger?" Matt asks. Mike all but sighs, thinking the question will shut down this particular avenue of discussion...

...But apparently all it does is spin the Baby Nerds off into how to make this idea a reality. Everything from fake blood made with ketchup and soy sauce (for “texture”), to a fake gun, to ransom notes, and even so far as *hiring* someone to kidnap either Max or Lucas.

By this point, Mike’s sitting there, watching with amused incredulity, eyes rolling in his head so hard he’s surprised they haven’t fallen out yet, trying to remember *how* he got to this point in the first place, and desperately wishing El was here to save him.

El, love of my life, my darling hero, where are you?

The sound of El’s amused chuckle echoes in his mind. *Why? Everything ok?*

*The Baby Nerds are **plotting** how to get Max and Lucas back together and I need you to save me, **please**. Tell me you’re almost done with Dance Club.* Mike spares a glance at his watch – it’s already after 4:30, so.... *Wait, you should be done by now. Where are you?*

Taking a shower, El says, voice teasing and coy.

Mike chokes on a gasp and he clamps down on his lips to keep from making a goddamn noise. *Jesus Christ, you can’t just **tell** me these things....* Because now he’s picturing her standing beneath the spray of the showerhead, water running down the curves he no longer needs to imagine to picture what they look like, head tilted back, neck curved and exposed, eyes shut, *oh god....*

El giggles. *You asked.*

Still... He whines, feeling his blood begin to heat under his skin before a thought occurs to him. *Wait, why are you showering after Dance Club. You don’t usually.* No, usually, she goes straight from Dance Club to wherever she and Mike end up making out at, not even bothering to change since she knows how much he loves her in the clothes she wears to Dance Club.

Jessica accidentally spilled her soda on me as we were gathering our things. Got all over my hair as I was standing up and, well, I’m not a fan of sticky hair, thank you very much.

Mike sighs, the sound all but inaudible given the chattering around him. *Well, hurry up and come rescue me. I'm outnumbered, here.*

And, sure enough, 5 minutes later, El steps into the doorway of the A/V room, damp hair pulled back in a ponytail, dressed in the clothes she was wearing earlier – navy sweater, black skirt, white knee socks, and Mary Janes. Mike grins as the Baby Nerds hush when she walks into the room, all of them looking at her like she's their Princess and they're just lowly knights pledged to her service.

And he gets it, he really does. El Hopper is *beautiful*, looking adorably sexy right at this moment, all fresh faced and almost Catholic school girl like. *And she's with me*, Mike thinks awed and proud all at the same time.

From there, it's only a few minutes until El manages to save him by asking him for a ride home (something he was going to do *anyway*, but the Baby Nerds don't need to know that).

Once they're in the car, Mike leans over and kisses El, sighing against her lips. "God, I love you," he says. "My hero."

El rolls her eyes and lightly backhands him against the chest. "They're a bunch of 14 year old nerd boys, Mike," she says. "They don't bite."

Grinning, Mike leans in further and lightly bites the outer shell of El's ear, nipping the skin, feeling her shiver. "I did when we were 14," he says, smugly.

He pulls back enough to see El looking up at him, her gaze darkening with the same heat that's running through his veins. "That's different," she says with a voice that's trending towards breathy, her eyes lowering briefly to look down at his lips.

"Oh yeah?" Mike teases. "How?" God, he can't stop himself from staring at her, his gaze dancing across her face, eyes alighting on her mouth, and he's leaning back over, mouth mere centimeters from hers, like she's magnetic and he's caught in her pull. This tension is delicious, riveting, *exciting*, and Mike never wants it to stop.

El purses her lips and leans back a moment later, letting out a strained sigh. *Ha, got you there*, Mike thinks, grinning.

“Anyway,” El says, like the last 30 seconds haven’t just happened. “You told them about Max and Lucas?”

Mike nods, pulling back to lean against the headrest of the driver’s seat. “Yeah, they’re worried, just like we are. Only, they had some really stupid ideas for how to get Max and Lucas to *talk* to each other.”

El giggles. “Again, 14.”

Mike grins. “Yeah, but there’s a good point in there, somewhere.” He sighs, giving her a look. “We need to do something, El. The rest of us, the rest of the Party. Max and Lucas need our help.”

El nods. “And when a Party member requires assistance....” She trails off with a small sigh.

Mike smiles. “Exactly.”

30 minutes later and Mike, El, Will, and Dustin are at the Hopper-Byers household, sitting in a circle on the bed in El’s room (it’s cleaner than Will’s, is El’s explanation for having this meeting in her bedroom – no one argues with that).

“So, what do we do?” Dustin asks.

“Yeah, we don’t even know *why* they broke up,” Will says. “If they’ve broken up.”

“Well, yeah, we gotta figure that out,” Mike says with a wave of his hand. That’s not his concern at the moment. Also, he doesn’t need to know, exactly. All he needs to know is that Max and Lucas aren’t talking and *that’s* what he needs to fix. He has faith they can take it from there. “But, really, we need a plan for how to get them to talk to each other once we *do* know.”

Dustin gasps, letting out a smile. “We gotta treat this like a matchmaking.”

Will smiles. “Oh, that’s perfect. Besides, it’s much happier.”

Mike finds himself smiling despite himself. It *does* sound much happier. “Exactly, good call, Dustin.”

*Oh, really, **matchmaking** now, are we?* El’s voice echoes inside his head.

Quit it. Mike focuses back on Will and Dustin. “So, how do we get them back together?” he asks, looking over at the two other boys.

There’s a beat and then all three boys are looking over at El where she sits, legs folded primly in front of her as she leans against her pillows. She arches an eyebrow, an amused smile on her face. “What are you all looking at me for?”

“Well, you’re a girl,” Dustin says.

“Obviously,” El cuts in, smile growing in to something more like a smirk.

“So, you know this kind of stuff better than we do,” Dustin continues. “I mean, chick flicks always have this kind of stuff in it, so...”

Now, both eyebrows are raised and alarm bells are going off in the back of Mike’s mind. But, she’s still smiling, so she must just be annoyed at Dustin. “Well, there’s always the tried and true locking them in a room and forcing them to talk plan,” El says with humor lacing her voice.

Mike cringes. “No, too obvious,” he says, frowning a bit.

El turns her head to look at him, eyes twinkling with teasing. “Oh, so what do you recommend, since you’re such an *expert*?”

Mike arches an eyebrow at her in return, annoyance flaring hot inside of him. But he can’t get too mad – she’s just so *adorable*. “Give me a moment, I’ll think of something.”

Don't think too hard or smoke might start coming out.

Mike gives her a frustrated glare, but El's face is maddeningly placid – soft smile, twinkling eyes, the perfect picture of innocence. But then Dustin speaks and takes Mike's mind temporarily off of El's strange behavior.

“Well, what if we split up and bring them to the same place. Like we don't need to lock them in, necessarily, but at least get them in the same room.”

“Oh, yeah,” Will says. “One of us could be with Lucas and then suddenly need to leave wherever we are, and then someone else could be with Max, but, like, ‘remember’ something and ask her to go ahead and we'll meet here there-”

“But Lucas will be there, instead,” Mike says, a bit breathless with amusement. There's a part of him that *knows* this idea isn't any better than anything the Baby Nerds were coming up with, but Dustin and Will's excitement is so infectious that he feels himself getting swept away by it anyway.

It goes on like that for a few minutes – the boys spit-balling ideas back and forth about the specifics, El just sitting there – until Mike hears El's voice in his head. *So, matchmaking isn't stupid?*

Mike looks over at El sharply. *Ok, that's it.* He reaches out and grabs her by the arm. “Can I talk to you for a moment?” He can hear the frustration in his voice as he glances over at Will and Dustin, who are looking back at him and El with frozen, blank expressions. “Alone?”

Without waiting for her assent, Mike pulls El off the bed and out of her room, just across the hall to the bathroom. He pushes her inside and the second he closes the door, he whirls around to confront her. “Ok, what the hell is going on with you? I thought you wanted to help Max and Lucas?” Mike makes sure to pitch his voice low – he's well aware that the door isn't all that thick and he doesn't want the others overhearing.

El straightens her shoulders and glares up at him, her face full of stubborn resolve. “Yeah, by *talking* to them, not by tricking them into

seeing each other. Besides, weren't you the one who told me matchmaking was dumb in the first place? Or, what, because it's *your* idea now, suddenly it's brilliant?"

Jesus, go *fucking* figure. "Hey, I stand by the fact that trying to set up your dad and step-mom is weird," Mike says firmly, remembering the *last* time they got into it about this. "You could just say something, in there, *by the way*, instead of snarking about it in my head the entire time." He steps closer to her so that she has to almost crane her neck to look up at him.

"Would you even *listen* if I did?" El's voice is low, intense, and it sends shivers down Mike's spine despite the annoyance that floods him. "The three of you are on such a roll, in there. I would only be in the way."

"Well, if you're not going to say anything, quit making snarky remarks in my head *the entire time*," Mike growls.

El arches an eyebrow in challenge. "*Make me.*" The words drip from her lips, all breathy and intense, and Mike feels it hit him like a semi-truck. He looks down at her, drinking in the sight of her flushed cheeks, the determined set to her shoulders, the way her lips are parted *just so* as she breathes in deep, heavy breathes. He's breathing just as heavy, practically panting. His blood swims hot in his veins, desire taking over him, and *god, he wants her so bad*. So, Mike does the only thing he can do in this moment.

He kisses her.

It takes Will a while to realize, as he and Dustin continue to plan their way into getting Lucas and Max back together, that it's been a while since he's seen *or heard* anything from Mike and El.

"...so, then I was thinking," Dustin says as Will looks away towards the direction of the bathroom. "Hey, uh, Will? Everything ok?"

Will narrows his gaze at the closed bathroom door. “How long do you think they’ve been in there for?”

“What? Mike and El?” Dustin turns to look in the same direction as Will. “Um, I don’t know. 15, 20 minutes? Why?”

Will rolls his eyes. “Hold on, I’m going to go check on them.”

Dustin snorts. “It’s your funeral.”

Will ignores the remark as he slides off the bed and travels the short distance to the bathroom. He stands in front of the door and, taking in a deep breath, turns his head so he can press his ear to the door. *Oh god, he’s going to regret this...*

Sure, enough, seconds later, the sound of *someone* moaning travels through the door and Will shudders. *Oh god, that was El. Ew, ew, ew, ew....*

Taking one more deep breath, Will pulls his head away from the door, raises his fist, and....

El swears she didn’t mean to get Mike so riled up. She’d just been so *looking forward* to spending time alone with him that afternoon. The afternoons after Dance Club were their days to make out, *guaranteed* (she loves how much Mike loves her in the clothes she wears to dance in and she *especially* loves the way he shows that love). And, well, there is no delicate way to say this: El is horny. She’d woken up *wanting* after a particularly potent dream involving her and Mike and *absolutely no clothing*. And it’d been torture *all day* being near him, not being able to touch him in the way she wanted to, having to *wait* until way later for a chance to get him alone.

But, when Mike said they needed to figure out a way to help Lucas and Max, El had agreed while screaming internally in frustration the *entire time*. Because, hey, she needed help, too...help of a more physical nature, that is. And then it turned out that helping Max and

Lucas meant *tricking* them to get them to talk to each other and *suddenly*, Mike's all on board with matchmaking when he gave her such a hard time about it a couple of years ago.

All things considered, it's no surprise she spends the entire afternoon punchy and snarky and pushing all of Mike's buttons. If she's going to be frustrated, then *so is he*. And then the way they bicker in the bathroom, all low and heated and *so good...*foreplay, she realizes – it's foreplay

So, really, El's not going to argue with the results, like *at all*, when Mike kisses her, hot and heavy, like he needs her *right now*.

She surges against him, rising up on her toes to better kiss him back. But he's too tall and she's just *not close enough*.

El turns them so that her back's facing the bathroom counter and she walks them towards it. Mike knows exactly where she's going with this, because he helps lift her so that she's sitting perched on the counter. And then he's stepping between her parted knees and kissing her *again* before she knows it.

And it's good, it's *so good*. He's pressed up against her, his body warm and solid and just *magnificent*, as they attempt to, once again, *devour* each other – lips parting in heavy, open mouthed kisses, tongues caressing, teeth nipping. Their hands wander, trying to touch *everything*. God, she just needs him *so much*.

His shirt goes first, then hers, then her bra. And then his hands are everywhere, once again, touching and teasing and setting her on fire. And it's *good*, El knows as she moans against him, back arching against him, feeling him shudder against her as she leans into his touch. But she just needs *more*.

Spurred on by desire, El hooks her ankles behind Mike's thighs and pulls him further into the cradle of her own thighs. Mike grins against her lips, breathing hard, bare chest pressing against hers with delicious friction, and one of his hands goes from her torso to her knee, just below the hem of her skirt.

El's breath catches in her throat as he slowly, so *slowly*, starts pushing

his fingers up underneath her skirt, his palm gliding smoothly against the skin of her thigh, and El *moans*, the sound filling the bathroom, reverberating against the tile.

God, yes, **finally**, she thinks, eager anticipation filling her veins. This stage of their relationship is still new, still exciting, still *thrilling*. It always makes her blush and *crave* whenever she thinks about how he touches her, how he makes her feel.

*(the first time, in the front seat of his car after Stacey's party, chasing their pleasure through two layers of denim, her whole body **singing** with sensation. the second, a day later in their basement fort after having a long talk about sex. talking soon turning to kissing, hands exploring, touching each other in places they'd only **imagined** touching each other, drawing sighs and moans and cries from each other, until they're both sated, both breathing hard as they come down from their high. since then, as often as possible – in real life, in the void, whenever they have a spare moment alone – figuring out what feels good, figuring out how to best please the other, together, **always** together.)*

El pushes up against him, her hands going to his belt buckle (*it's only fair if both of you come*, Max's voice echoes in her head), fingers scrabbling to undo metal and leather as his own fingers inch higher and higher, nearly there, nearly *touching* her, almost right where she wants it, and-

The sound of someone pounding on the bathroom door pierces through the haze of lust and need that surround them, followed quickly by Will's voice, shouting. "Hey, stop defiling my sister!" The tone of Will's voice isn't angry, just annoyed with a bit of exasperated teasing.

But, still, it's enough to make them break apart just a little, faces pulling back, hands freezing mid-action, torsos still pressed against each other.

Mike's head drops to her shoulder. "*Fuck*," he whispers, his breath tickling her skin.

El giggles just a bit. "Irony."

Mike lifts his head. “Ha, ha,” he deadpans. El takes the moment to look at him – pupils blown, lips swollen, flush high on his cheeks. *God, she loves him*, she thinks, smiling.

Mike chuckles, the sound low. “What’s so amusing?”

El shakes her head and, even though the low thrum of desire still beats in her veins, her whole body flushes with love. “Nothing, I just love you.”

Mike grins, the expression somehow both rakish and love-sick all at the same time – *100% swoon worthy*, she thinks. “Love you, too,” he says, leaning in to press a soft, lingering kiss to her lips. Her heart skips a beat in her chest as she kisses him back, almost chastely compared to a few minutes ago, but no less full of love and overwhelming feeling.

“We should probably get out of the bathroom before Will comes back,” El says once the kiss has ended. She spares a glance down to where their bodies are pressed together and looks back up at Mike with a grin. “Though, I suppose you’re gonna need a minute, aren’t you?”

Mike rolls his eyes and El lets out a laugh. “Fine, mock my pain,” he says around a groan.

El’s still giggling a bit a few moments later as she leaves the bathroom, Mike staying behind to calm down, both of them now fully dressed. She goes back into her bedroom, knowing she doesn’t look at all embarrassed getting interrupted going at it with her boyfriend.

Eventually, Mike joins the rest of them and the boys continue planning crazy ideas for how to get Max and Lucas back together, though Mike isn’t as enthusiastic about it as he was not 30 minutes ago.

This is dumb, El thinks, but doesn’t say. Instead, she lets them keep going, lets them keep planning, knowing that, at best, it’ll just annoy Max and Lucas.

No, El has a different idea.

She's just going to talk to them.

Max wishes she knew how everything got so fucked up.

One minute, she's with Lucas, having a great fucking time (*lips pressed together, his hands all over her, hot palms, nimble fingers*).

The next, he's telling her that he loves her and, suddenly, Max is running, heart in her throat, panic making her palms clammy, *no, he can't love me, he **can't***.

But, of course, Lucas chases after her and that's when things go from bad to worse. Because he pushes, *of course* he does. It's always been part of how their relationship has worked, the push and pull, the give and take, all delicious heated tension with an edge of antagonism that is the hallmark of their interactions.

She tells him to go away and *god*, if only he would *listen*. Because then she lies when he won't take no for an answer and then he calls her out on her bullshit, seeing right through her. And then they're yelling at each other, saying *horrible* things – that she's not normal, that she's just been a burden for him, that they don't need each other – all of it lies with the insidious seed of truth buried in the core, both of them angry and hurt and so *frustrated*.

So, in the end, she walks away and he lets her, just like she wanted. Only it's *not* what she wanted because the second Max steps inside her house, she feels sick inside – sick and sad and full of regret.

If this were a normal house, with a normal family, Max's mom and step-dad would call out with concern as she runs past the family room, beelining it for her bedroom, tears in her eyes.

Only, this isn't a normal house and it sure as hell isn't a normal family.

Max comes home to an empty house – Mom and Neil out of town, Billy long gone, having fucked off back to California the second he

graduated high school at the end of Max's 8th grade year. So there's no one there to be concerned, no one to care about Max's tears, to ask what's wrong, to love her and comfort her and bring her hot tea or ice cream.

So Max goes to her room, curls up in a ball on her bed, and cries – *alone*, always alone.

She spends all day Sunday by herself, alternating between staring at the wall and beating the shit out of the punching bag hanging in the garage until her knuckles are bruised and bloody. And all the while, she *thinks*, thinks about what the fuck is wrong with her, thinks about how annoyed she is with Lucas for not listening, thinks about how mad she is at herself for not doing...what, she doesn't know, but she's still *mad*.

But, what she does know is this:

When Lucas pushed her, when he yelled at her and accused her of being too difficult, of being *not normal*, her first instinct had been to raise her fist, to *hit* him. And it makes her sick each and every time she thinks about it – the hot surge of anger, fingers curling in a fist, nails biting into her palm, arm coiled back, ready, *eager*....

God, what does it say about her that her first instinct when angered was to want to hurt? And not just anyone, but *Lucas*, her boyfriend, the person she cares about more than *anyone*.

(Does she love him? She's not sure – she thinks she might – but she also knows if you love someone, you shouldn't want to hurt them.)

Lucas *loves* her and she just wants to hurt him.

She doesn't deserve him, doesn't deserve his love.

Somehow, on Monday, it's worse.

Having to see Lucas, to see how miserable he is, still feeling that undercurrent of anger swim in her veins, poisoning her and making her sick...god, she wishes she could just stay home. But she can't – she's full of enough bravado and moxie to keep her head held high as she walks through the halls of Hawkins High.

But, Max isn't brave enough to tell El the details of what happened when El confronts her, isn't brave enough to tell her that Lucas told her he loved her and she ran like a coward.

Still, she's grateful beyond all words when Will and El join her for lunch, even more so when it's Mike and Dustin the next day. It had been a fear of hers. Max keenly remembers the way Mike had treated her when she first came to Hawkins – stand-offish, out right *bitchy* at times. And that had been when he thought she was trying to replace El, a response born out of grief and longing, but also *loyalty*. Above all else, the Party is loyal, to a fault sometimes. And Lucas has been a member of the Party since its creation. And since Max hurt him, well...it doesn't take too many leaps of logic for Max to arrive at the conclusion that she'll be the punished, ostracized party, that the rest of the Party will side with the member who has the most seniority.

She almost wants to cry when it doesn't turn out that way, that no sides have been taken, that the rest of the Party are equally concerned about her as they are about Lucas.

Because if there's one thing Max knows for sure, it's this: people don't stick around. Not for Max.

They never have.

It's Thursday before Winter Break and El is driving over to Max's house, a paper grocery bag perched in the passenger seat next to her. She's got both hands clutching around the steering wheel and, once again, El thinks about how much she doesn't like driving.

She doesn't *hate* it, necessarily...she just vastly prefers being a passenger (especially if Mike is driving and she can convince him to pull off to the side of the road and...yeah).

But, El knows how to drive and she can when she has to. Like now.

She eventually pulls up in front of Max's house and parks across the

street. For a moment, El just stares at what she supposes is actually the Hargrove house, despite the fact that she never interacts with the only Hargrove who lives there.

(Did Max's mom change her last name when she got married? El isn't sure....)

But, only a couple of lights are on, so El knows that Max's mom and step-dad aren't home, which makes this easier. El doesn't really like interacting with Max's parents – though Max has promised her that her dad is cool, even though El's never met him – so she's glad they don't appear to be home.

So, taking a deep breath to steel herself against the cold of the mid-December late afternoon, El grabs the paper bag from the front seat next to her and makes her way to the front door. El rings the doorbell and, a few moments, Max answers the door.

El smiles as she spots her best friend and lifts the paper bag in her hands so that it's between her and Max. "Now, I know it's December, but the movies always call for ice cream whenever someone breaks up with their boyfriend or is going through some tough times. So... rocky road and mint chip sound good to you?" El says in lieu of a greeting.

Max stares at her for a long, silent moment before she smiles, letting out a sad laugh as she steps aside to let El in. "Dibs on the mint chip."

The two girls make light-hearted small talk as they grab spoons and make their way for Max's bedroom. And it's only once they're a few spoonfuls into the ice cream, both of them sitting cross-legged on Max's bed, that El asks the question she came over to ask. "Max, what happened between you and Lucas?" The question, though blunt, is spoken in soft, gentle tones, filled with no judgment, just curiosity and concern.

Max pauses, a spoonful of mint chip halfway to her mouth as she stares at El. And then she sighs and the spoon resumes its journey. It takes her a minute as she eats her bite of mint chip to gather up the will to answer. And this is when El notices just how pale and tired Max looks, how *scared*, and her heart goes out to her friend. "Lucas

told me he loves me,” Max says and the tone in her voice sounds like Lucas might as well have told her he was dying.

El breathes in a sharp breath through her nose and her free hand, the hand not holding the spoon, immediately goes out to rest on Max’s knee. “Max,” she breathes, a bit overwhelmed. Of all the things she thought could have been wrong, Lucas telling Max that he loves her *was not it*. “That’s a good thing, though, isn’t it?”

Max snorts and shoves another spoon of ice cream into her mouth. “Well, for *normal* people, it would be,” she says after swallowing. There’s a sour note of derision, of self-loathing in Max’s voice that makes El frown. She hates it when Max talks about herself like this.

“You make it sound like you’re a freak,” El says. “You’re *not*.”

Max levels a look at El. “How did you react when Mike told you he loved you?”

El grins at the memory. “I was really happy and told him I loved him too,” she says. “But, we were in the Void at the time, so if you’re looking for normal, we aren’t it.”

Max rolls her eyes. “Still, you reacted like a normal girl all things considered. He loves you, you love him, and when he told you, you told him in return.”

El frowns again. “So, Lucas told you he loves you...and then what?”

At this, Max averts her gaze. “I ran,” she says. Max then launches into the story of *everything* that happened – how she ran, how Lucas chased after her, how they argued, how they ended things with her storming away, him standing his ground, both of them yelling they don’t need each other.

It breaks El’s heart to hear. Because she *knows* that Max and Lucas care about each other so much, so much so that they tend to get in their own way trying to express those emotions.

Still, El needs to ask. “Max, do you love Lucas?”

Everything in the room just *freezes*, the question hanging in the air. El

stares at Max, watching the emotions play across the redhead's face, everything from uncertainty to annoyance to fear to, and yes, *love*. Still, when Max finally answers, her voice is a squeak. "I don't know," she says, wide-eyed and pale. Max glances away. "I mean...I care about him, I just...love? Ellie, I don't des-" Max cuts herself off, lips clamping shut.

Still, El knows what Max was about to say. *I don't deserve it*. Love, to be loved in return, *any of it*, El isn't sure.

But El knows there's a lot Max keeps hidden deep inside, a lot she shields from others, a lot she doesn't feel like she's worthy of. El also knows that a lot of that comes some of the shit that's gone on in Max's family, from how she's grown up.

El isn't sure how to respond, exactly, but she also knows not to push Max too much. So, instead, El just scoots closer to Max and hugs her, ice cream set aside. "You'll figure it out," El says, not exactly sure what she's referring to – Max's feelings for Lucas, the situation with their relationship, or *both* – but she knows that Max needs her support, even if El doesn't know what else to say or how to help, no matter how much she wants to.

Because how can she convince Max she's worthy of love?

El's still thinking about this on Saturday, two days later. The warmth of the blanket fort surrounds them on this lazy Saturday afternoon. Holly's at a friend's house and Mike's parents are driving to Indianapolis to pick Nancy up from the airport. So it's just her and Mike in the Wheeler house, taking advantage of being alone in the house to snuggle in their fort, the blankets drawn around them, blocking out the whole world, from prying eyes.

They'd made out for a while, but now they're just dozing, wrapped up in each other.

Well, Mike is dozing. El is thinking, thinking about Max and Lucas,

thinking about how best to help her friends.

The feel of Mike's fingers caressing her stomach from where his hand is nestled under her sweater makes her jump a bit. "You're thinking really loudly over there," he says, murmuring, sleepy.

El turns in Mike's embrace and grins at the sleepy smile on his face. "How can you tell?"

Mike slips his hand out from under her sweater and pushes her hair behind her ear, tapping the side of her head when he finishes. "Smoke's starting to come out of your ears."

El rolls her eyes. "Oh, very funny."

Letting out a breathy chuckle, Mike leans over and presses a soft kiss against El's lips in apology. "What's going on in here?" he asks, trailing the tip of his thumb across El's temple.

El sighs, both at the caress and at the question. "Just thinking about Max and Lucas."

Mike nods. "Yeah," he sighs. El told him everything that Max told her, as well as some of her suspicions about where a lot of the problems Max and Lucas are having is coming from. "Hey, did you want me to talk to her?"

El feels her eyebrows furrow as she looks at Mike with confusion. "Why?"

Mike shrugs, a sad smile tugging at the corner of his lips. "I know what it's like to wrestle self-doubt. I also know what it's like to come from a shitty family."

El smiles, her heart twisting in her chest. She places a palm on Mike's cheek and inches even closer than him. "That's why you have me," she says.

Mike's smile turns from sad to full of love. "Yeah, I do." He lets out a small, almost silent laugh. "But Max and Lucas are different than you and me. And Max has never been comfortable with her emotions." He shrugs, looking away a bit. "I get it. I'd probably be the same if you

didn't know how to sneak past all my defenses."

El giggles. "You've never *had* any defenses," she teases even while she's so, so grateful for him, grateful that he's willing to help.

Mike pouts at El. "Hey, that's not a nice thing to say to your loving boyfriend who *only* wants to help."

This pulls a full laugh out of El. "Wow, you're right. I'm so sorry. How ever can I make it up to you?"

Mike grins and leans over her. "Oh, I can think of a couple of things," he says as he rolls her so that she's on her back.

He kisses her and every inch of El's body explodes with butterflies, her breath catching in her throat like it always does, as his lips move against hers with delicious, agonizing slowness, their kisses deep and soul-searing and just *wow*.

God, she loves him. It's not the first time she thinks this and she knows it's nowhere near the last time, either. But the realization still takes her breath away every time. And she's grateful beyond words that she's his and he's hers and they're together, that they'll be together, *always*.

El breaks the kiss and looks up at him. He's looking back down at her, eyes filled with overwhelming love, lips curved in a soft, awed smile, like he can't believe she's with him. "Thank you," she breathes, her breath stuttering in her chest.

Mike's smile widens and he tilts his head just a bit, confused. "What for?"

Everything. "Just being you," she says.

And then she's kissing him again and, for a little while, the whole world ceases to matter.

The ceiling above him is the perfect representation of his mood: blank, barren, and depressing.

Lucas lays on his bed, arms folded behind his head, and just *stares*.

Outside, the sun shines through thin layers of clouds, washing the world around him in bone chilling white.

It's a good day for a run, he thinks, picturing the burn of the cold in his lungs, the wash of the chill over his limbs. But it requires more ambition than he currently has to get up and go.

No one is happier than he is that Winter Break is here and school is out for a few weeks...though "happy" is a relative term. "Relief" is more like it, he thinks – relief that he doesn't have to see Max, relief that he doesn't have to feel the way his heart squeezes in his chest at the sight of her.

He told her he loves her and it pushed her away and he doesn't know what to make of that. Does she love him back? Has she just been along for the ride this whole time? Is she just not there yet?

The questions are killing him, but Lucas is scared of the answers. Because if she doesn't love him, if this has just been a good time for her....

Lucas swallows roughly, stomach churning. He couldn't take it if that were the case.

No, it's better to wallow in uncertainty than drown in surety.

But all that accomplished was the worst week of school in recent memory: the Party split up, two of the six members not talking to each other. Lucas is glad, though, that the others are still making sure to spend time with Max. He knows she's always, *still*, a little unsure of her place in the Party, despite the fact that she's been a member for the last 3 years and went through the worst orientation a person could go through (Demodogs and fighting her racist step-brother).

The doorbell rings, but Lucas only distantly cares about it. He doesn't even move until his door opens and his mom peeks her head in.

“Lucas, El is here to see you.”

Lucas’ eyes widen and he sits up as his mom steps aside and El comes into view. “El?”

El smiles, serene and comforting. “Hi Lucas. Can I come in?”

For a moment, Lucas is dumbstruck, trying to figure out what she’s doing here. But, he comes back to himself moments later. “Uh, yeah, sure,” he says, folding his legs up and gesturing to the space on his bed where his legs just were. “Did you wanna sit down?”

El nods, her smile widening just a bit, and she comes over to sit across from him, legs folded beside her as she settles on the bed, leaning on her hip. She licks her lips, biting down on the bottom one – a gesture so reminiscent of Mike, Lucas almost rolls his eyes – and sighs. “How are you doing, Lucas?” she asks, worry reflected in her gaze.

Lucas’ heart gives a weird thump in his chest and warmth spreads through him. God, he loves this girl – his friend, his sister in all but blood, his hero – and Lucas smiles, grateful beyond words. Still, he shrugs. “I’m ok, considering.”

El smiles, all sympathy and caring. “Good, I’m glad.” She pauses for a moment. “Well, not good that the situation exists, but....” El trails off, waving a hand. “You know what I mean.”

For a moment, Lucas marvels at El, a memory of the first night he met her surfacing in his thoughts. *Oh, how far she’s come.* “I get what you mean,” he says. A little embarrassed at the question that comes to mind, Lucas looks away. “Um, how’s Max doing?” Because, despite everything that happened, he still loves her. Can’t stop, actually.

El lets out a small, sad laugh. “She’s...not ok, but coping.” El tilts her head. “You should talk to her,” she says.

Lucas sucks in a deep, quick breath. “Oh, um, I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

But, the idea seems to have only emboldened El and she squares her shoulders, face hardening with determination. “No, I think you really

should,” El says. “She misses you, I know she does. She’s just....” El pauses, searching for the words. “There’s a lot Max keeps hidden, a lot of ways she’s been hurt. But she cares about you, Lucas. She really does.”

Frustration rises in Lucas’ chest and he lets out a growl. “But, why doesn’t she just say something, then?”

A sad smile pulls up the corner of El’s lips. “She’s scared, Lucas. I’m not sure of what, but she’s scared. You know her family life hasn’t been great and she barely sees or even talks to her dad. Probably has something to do with that, but she doesn’t talk about that kind of stuff a lot.”

Lucas sighs and picks at the fabric of his pants. “I wish she would. I could help.”

“I know you could,” El says. “But, you also have to remember that Max is stubborn. Pushing her to open up won’t make her open up. You have to let her choose. All you can do is let her know that you’re willing to listen when she’s ready to talk.”

Lucas gulps and looks El straight in the eye. “And if she’s never ready?”

El shrugs. “Then you need to decide if you’re ok with that. You deserve to be loved, Lucas, and if Max isn’t able to give you what you need, then no matter how much you love her, you need to figure out if it’s worth it to you.”

It’s not what Lucas wanted to hear, but he didn’t realize he needed to hear it until El said it. “I just....” He sighs. “We’ve been together for so long, Ellie. I don’t know if I’m ready to let that go. I *love* her.”

El reaches out and places a hand over one of his. “Then fight for her, Lucas. Let her know you still care, let her know you still love her, and that you’re not going to give up on her unless she absolutely lets you know it’s over.”

Lucas lets out a shaky breath. “And if it’s over?”

The hand over his squeezes, fingers curling around his. “Then we

figure out how to adjust. We're the Party. It's what we do."

For a moment, Lucas just takes in El's words, thinking about them, folding them into himself. Then he's moving, scooting closer so he can reach out and hug her. El wraps her arms around him with no hesitation, her embrace so warm and soothing it brings tears to prick the back of his closed eye lids. "Love you, Ellie."

"Love you, too, Lucas."

It's the middle of the day the first Tuesday of Winter Break when the doorbell rings.

"What the fuck?" Max mutters as she looks up from the TV. She's on the couch in the family room, "The Shining" playing on the screen, bowl of popcorn in her lap.

Scowling, Max presses the pause button on the remote, Jack Nicholson's face freezing on the screen (*heh*, she thinks, despite the annoyance that flares inside of her), and gets up to answer the door. "This better be good," she sighs, voice raising above the earlier mutter.

Max has never fully acclimated to Indiana winters, so she makes sure her knit blanket is wrapped tightly around her as she makes her way to the door. And, even though Max is annoyed at the interruption, she makes sure to put on a pleasant face as she opens the door....

...And immediately drops it when she sees Mike standing on her door step, wearing black jeans and a denim jacket, hands stuffed in his pockets. "What are you doing here, Wheeler?" she asks.

Mike raises an eyebrow and smirks. "Wow, Mayfield, glad to see you, too." He glances down at the blanket wrapped around her shoulders. "What, your heat not working?"

Max sticks her tongue out at him. "Fuck off, I'm *cold*." She sighs. "No, really, Mike, what are you doing here?"

The smirk on Mike's face turns into a genuine smile. "I wanted to talk," he says, shrugging. "Wanna go for a drive? There's this diner in Cloverdale over that's supposed to be killer. My treat."

Max snorts. "What, you're willing to break into your 'I'm gonna marry El' money?" she asks, thinking of that beat up tin hiding in the back of his closet that he showed her once when the Party'd had too much to drink while hanging out at the Wheelers' last summer.

Mike blushes. "You promised never to mention that."

Max grins. "No, I promised never to say anything to anyone else. And..." Max trails off, looking around. "Well, I don't see anyone else."

Mike glares. "Look, do you wanna go with me, or not?"

Max shrugs. "I'm always up for a burger and fries." She goes to turn to get her shoes and jacket before she stops, grinning. "Can I have a shake, too?"

Mike shrugs. "I said my treat, didn't I?"

Max lets out a laugh. "You're such a pushover, Wheeler."

"Yeah, yeah, just go bury yourself in your layers, Mayfield," Mike says to the accompaniment of Max's cackle.

Soon enough, the two are bundled in Mike's car, heat blasting as he drives to the next town over, the two of them bickering over the radio, over the heat, just over *everything*. It's the most normal Max has felt in over a week and she's grateful that Mike's given her this moment, even though she'd rather die than tell him.

They get to this diner – this ramshackle joint called the Four Leaf Clover – and walk inside, the smell of fried food with a distinct undertone of disinfectant assaulting them. They're seated in a booth, cracked vinyl seats creaking beneath them, and handed two, peeling laminated menus by the hostess. "Someone'll be by to take you and your girlfriend's orders in just a bit, sweetheart," the hostess says.

Mike pales, panic reflected in his wide gaze. "No, wait, she's not – I

mean we're not – I have a – and it's not-”

But the hostess is walking away, not caring in the slightest. And Max is just *dying*, laughing so hard that the entire restaurant fills with the sound. “Oh my *god*, Wheeler. You should see the look on your face! Wait until I tell El!”

Mike blushes and grumbles, shoulders slumping. “Keep laughing, Mayfield, and you're walking back to Hawkins.”

But it's an empty threat and they both know it. Both of them turn their focus to the menus, Max's laughter down to an occasional giggle that punctuates their perusal.

When their waitress comes over, both of them order burgers and fries, Mike ordering double, Max adding a vanilla shake.

Mike grins as the waitress walks away. “You're gonna kill yourself with all those calories, Maxie.”

“You're one to talk, *Mikey*, with the two burgers and double fries you just ordered.”

Mike shrugs. “What, I'm still a growing boy.”

Max snorts. “Yeah, *out*, not up.” They sip at the water the waitress left when she came to take their order and, after only a few moments, Max's curiosity gets the better of her. “Ok, Mike, seriously. What is this about?”

Mike folds his arms on the table and sighs. “Well, for one, I figured you could do with someone doing something nice for you – I know shit hasn't been easy. And, just, also...I don't know, I guess I wanted to lend a sympathetic ear.”

There's something Mike isn't quite telling her, but Max doesn't push it. Instead, she smiles, the expression small and tight. “Thanks. I appreciate it, but I don't particularly feel like talking about my personal shit with you.”

Mike nods. “That's fair,” he says. “Just....”

Max tilts her head to one side. “Just, what?”

Mike’s chest puffs out before he releases his breath in a sudden rush. “Look, I’m going to tell you some things, ok? You don’t have to say anything, or tell me anything back. Just...listen, ok?”

Max’s eyes widen. There’s a quality to Mike’s voice right now – solemn, grown-up, *vulnerable* – that makes Max lean forward. God, she can see why he’s the leader, she really can. When Mike talks, people *listen*. “Ok,” she says, the word more breathed than spoken.

Mike nods. “Did anyone ever tell you about the time I almost jumped off a cliff at the quarry to save Dustin?”

“No,” Max says, voice hushed, enraptured.

Mike smiles, but it’s sad. “It was the week we met El. Troy had been bothering us – you remember him, right?”

“Uh, yeah,” Max says. “Got kicked out freshman year, right? Sent to military school?”

Mike grins. “Yeah, that’s the one. So, long story short, during the week Will was missing, we’d had an assembly at Hawkins Middle when everyone else thought he was dead and, well, Troy was laughing. I got mad, pushed him, but before he could do anything, El used her powers to freeze him and make him piss his pants.” Mike pauses, laughing a bit at the memory, looking like the awed, love-sick fool that he always is when he talks about El. “Well, Troy came after us later for revenge, wanting to know how we’d done it. It was just me and Dustin – Lucas and I were fighting about El’s place in the Party-”

Max snorts. “Shocker.”

Mike grins. “Yeah, I know. Full circle, blah, blah, blah. Anyway, it was just me and Dustin. Troy and James had chased us to the quarry, had us cornered. Troy was threatening Dustin with a knife, saying he’d cut out Dustin’s teeth...unless I jumped.”

Max gulps. “But, you’d die.”

Mike nods, his grin fading. "I know. And I *knew*. Still, I walked over to that edge and looked over. Dustin was behind me, begging me not to jump. And, as I looked down at the water, you know what I thought?"

Max almost can't breathe. "What?"

Mike smiles, the expression sad. "*He deserves to live more than I do.*" Mike shrugs. "So, I jumped. Stepped off that edge."

"But El caught you," Max says, concern bubbling in her stomach.

"Yeah, she did," Mike says with a nod. "But I didn't know she was there. She'd run off the day before after I yelled at her, after she hurt Lucas when he and I were fighting. It's why we were out in the first place, Dustin and I – we were looking for her. So I had no idea she was nearby, no idea she was going to save me." Mike pauses, taking in a deep breath. "I stepped off the edge knowing I was going to die and was 100% ok with it because I thought I didn't deserve to live."

Max swallows the lump that's appeared in her throat. "That's not true. You know that, right?"

Mike gives a half-shrug, like he's conceding the point. "I know that *now*," he says. "But, for a while, I didn't. It took a lot of hours with my therapist to make sense of where I was at in my head at the time. A lot of it came from the fact that I was depressed. And a lot of it came from my family. I'm the cursed middle child and the only son, both stuck in obscurity and constantly a disappointment. As a kid, Nancy was the perfect one and, once Holly was born, she was the cute one and I was just left in the middle feeling both like the spare and not the man my dad wanted me to be."

Mike pauses, taking in a deep breath. "Now, I know that it's my parents' fault for how they treated me, for how they raised me, but when I was younger, I thought it was something wrong with *me*, not them. I thought I wasn't deserving of love and praise and affection. I thought I didn't deserve to have the normal things other kids had. And, when I looked at my friends, I saw all their happy families. I mean, yeah, both Will and Dustin's dads skipped town, but their moms love them and do *anything* for them. And don't get me started

on Lucas' family.

"But, when I looked at them and saw that they all had what I didn't, I assumed the problem was with *me*. So, when it came down to what I saw as a choice between me and Dustin, I thought he deserved to live more. Because his mom would miss him more than mine would miss me."

Max has to all but sit on her hands to keep from reaching out for him. "Do...do you still think that?"

Mike's lips stretch with the ghost of a smile. "Sometimes, I do. My relationship with my mom is...difficult, sometimes. We work at it though, and I try to talk to her when I'm feeling this way. I'm not always successful, but...." Mike sighs, letting out a small laugh. "What I wanted to say is that I know how it feels when you feel like you don't deserve to be loved, when you don't feel like you deserve to have normal things that all other people have, when all you feel is anger and sadness that has no outlet but towards the people you care about. El told me a bit about what happened with you and Lucas and I just wanted to say that I understand. I'm not here to tell you that you need to get back together with Lucas- that's for you and Lucas to decide – but, whatever you decide, however this resolves, I get it, ok? And we're always going to be here for you, no matter what. I promise."

Max feels her lower lip begin to tremble, tears building along the edges of her eyelids. "You promise?" Max can hear how small her voice sounds, how lost and scared she is. But she can't help it.

Mike reaches across and lays his hand over one of hers. "I promise."

Max closes her eyes and feels a couple of tears escape from under her closed eyelids. She lifts her other hand to wipe them away and looks back at Mike. "What should I do?"

Mike smiles and squeezes her hand. "If I were you, I would talk to Lucas, tell him how you're feeling. You don't have to tell him everything, you don't have to tell him almost anything, if you don't want to. But this is hurting you, Max. And you don't deserve this. You *never* deserve this."

Mike's words are the key to the lock Max has on her emotions and she bursts into tears right in the middle of the diner. Mike immediately moves into action, getting out of his side of the booth and sliding in next to her, pulling her into his arms without hesitation. "Hey, it's ok," he says, holding her tight. Max wraps her arms around him and presses her face against his shoulder, her tears soaking into the fabric of his sweater.

God, it feels good to be hugged by a boy, even though it's not Lucas – all strong arms and broad shoulders and solid warmth. And Mike's a good hugger, holding her close, pressing a comforting kiss to the top of her head when she sniffles, breath escaping her in a sob. He murmurs words of comfort and never relaxes his hold on her, continuing to hold her tight as she cries.

And, though Max is embarrassed – god, what kind of loser fucking loses it in the middle of a diner, for crying out loud – it's ok because she knows Mike's not judging her. *He gets it.* And that's all that really matters.

Their food comes out sometime during Max's meltdown and, eventually, once Max has calmed down, they get around to eating it. The food's gone a little cold, the shake kind of melted, but it's still good, still almost perfect.

And when Mike eventually drops her off back at home, walking her to her door like the gentleman that he is, Max gives him one last hug. "Thanks, Mike," she says, arms wrapping around his torso.

Mike hugs her back and her throat almost closes up with tears again. "Any time, Max."

Max goes inside to an empty house, but she's feeling better than she has in days. And she has a new mission.

She's going to talk to Lucas.

Lucas plans for days to go and talk to Max, spends days screwing up the courage.

But, in the end, she beats him to it.

The phone in the Sinclair house rings on a Wednesday morning. Both Lucas' parents are at work, so Lucas answers it, completely unsuspecting. "Hello?"

"Hey, Stalker."

Lucas gasps, breath sticking in his throat. "Max?"

"Yeah." Her voice is tinny through the phone, but it's still one of the most beautiful sounds he's ever heard.

Lucas fights to get his breathing under control. "Um, what's up?" he asks, cringing. *Been almost two weeks since you talked to the love of your life and you ask her 'what's up'? God, what an idiot...*

"Can we...." Lucas can hear Max taking in a deep breath. "Can we talk? Not over the phone," she rushes to explain.

Lucas nods, even though he knows she can't see it. "Yeah, of course, sure. Um, how about the quarry. Down by the water?"

Max breaths out a laugh. "Yeah, ok. Good. Sounds good. See you in half an hour? Unless you're busy, that is. Whenever you can, I guess."

Lucas chuckles despite the awkwardness. "I'll see you in 30."

A little under half an hour later, Lucas is sitting on the hood of his car, clean shirt on over jeans, fleece lined jacket square on his shoulders. He's jittery, leg bouncing up and down, foot propped on the front bumper, nerves overrunning his stomach.

And it just gets worse when he sees Max drive up in her coupe. His heart feels like it's about to explode and it takes everything he has to keep from running towards her when she parks and climbs out. Because, things are still uncertain between them and, above all, Lucas is still hurt, still a little angry. And he just needs to know where they stand before he makes any move towards her.

Don't push her, the memory of El's voice whispers in his head and Lucas takes in a deep breath to steady himself.

Max is walking towards him, her hands stuffed in her pockets, and Lucas can see that she's shivering a bit. He can't help but smile. *Girl still hasn't gotten used to the winters out here*, he thinks with a small shake of his head. Normally, before everything got flipped on its head, Lucas would reach out and take her under his arm, let her snuggle against him for warmth. But they're not back to that yet. They might *never* be back to that.

"Hey," she says, small smile on her face.

Lucas' smile grows. God, he really can't help himself – he just loves her, despite everything. "Hey." He scoots over on the hood of his car to make room. "You wanna sit? The engine's still warm."

Max's smile turns grateful and she hops up beside him, the suspension creaking a bit under the extra weight. "Thanks," she says.

Lucas nods, feeling the awkwardness start creeping in. "So," he says, turning towards her slightly. "What did you want to talk about?"

Max turns almost out of reflex, it seems, because she looks down and reaches up to tuck her hair behind her ear, a nervous gesture of hers. "First, um...." She trails off, trembling and Lucas' breathing picks up, his heart squeezing painfully in his chest.

Before he can convince himself not to, Lucas reaches out and lays a hand on her jacket-covered forearm. "Hey, it's ok. Take your time. Or, if you want, I can go first?"

Max looks at him, gratitude shining in her blue eyes, and her shoulders slump in relief. "Ok," she says.

Lucas' lips twitch in a small smile. "I'm sorry," he says without any more preamble. "I shouldn't have pushed you that night or said those horrible things. I was just...." He pauses to gather his thoughts, his words. "I was hurt, ok? I told you I love you and you just...ran. But it doesn't excuse the way I reacted. And I'm sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable." Lucas licks his lips, screwing up his courage, and

soldiers on. "I'm not sorry I said I love you. I meant that, 100%. And I never want to be sorry about how I feel about you. You're the most amazing girl – no, *woman* – I've ever met. And I won't say that it won't suck if you don't love me back, but I can deal, ok? I just...." Lucas pulls in a deep breath. "I need you, ok? I just need you and I–"

Max's hand shoots out, two fingers pressed over his lips. Lucas stops and just *looks* at her. Her eyes are shining with tears – of happiness or sadness, Lucas doesn't know, but the sight tugs at his heart all the same. "I'm sorry, too," she says after a moment. "I was just so scared. I know I didn't react the best and I never wanted to hurt you. I shouldn't have ran and I shouldn't have lashed out at you. I should have talked to you, should have told you what I'm feeling."

"So, why didn't you?" Lucas asks, unable to keep from interjecting with the question.

Max lets out a laugh. "I don't know if you've noticed this, Stalker, but I'm not the best at dealing with my emotions." She pauses and a million questions burn on the tip of Lucas' tongue, but he keeps his mouth shut and gives her the space to talk when she feels ready. "I just...I've been thinking a lot about this and talking with some of the others and I...." She pauses, gulping. "Everyone that loves me leaves me, Lucas. My dad physically, my mom emotionally, and I *can't* lose you, too." The tears that are shining in her eyes spill over and down her cheeks and Lucas feels his stomach sink at the sight. It takes everything he has to keep from reaching out for her. "And I – I don't know for sure if I love you, too. But I know I don't want to lose you and I don't know how to *fix* this and–"

Ok, that's it. Lucas can't keep still any longer. He reaches out and pulls Max towards him, wrapping his arms around her, pulling her so that she's sitting across his lap. Tears burn in his eyes as she hugs him back, her tears warm against the side of his neck. "I'm sorry," she says through her tears. "I'm so sorry."

"Me too," Lucas says, voice thick.

"Please, don't leave me."

Lucas lets out a shaky sigh. "I'm not going anywhere, I promise," he

says. "You can't get rid of me that easy, MadMax."

Max laughs, but it's punctuated with tears and sniffles. "Lucas?" she asks, pulling away just a bit.

Lucas looks at her, the sight of her so close stealing the breath from his lungs. "Yeah?" he whispers.

Max's lips twitch in a small smile. "Kiss me?"

Lucas smiles. Yeah, he can do that.

So he does, her mouth soft against his, lips kissing him back with fervor. His hand finds its way into her hair and he feels complete, the weight of her pressed against him, warm and soft and *here*.

And while Lucas doesn't know what the future holds for the two of them, he knows he'll fight for them. Even if that means knowing when to let her go.

It's three days before Christmas and Mike and El are lounging on his bed. A late December chill has swept through Hawkins, rendering the basement too cold even with the heat cranked up. So, Mike and El trade basement fort snuggles for bed snuggles. They're cuddled under a thin quilt as they trade soft, slow, *luxurious* kisses, perfectly content.

El sighs, fingers curling in Mike's shirt. "This is nice," she says, breaking the kiss, speaking the words against Mike's lips.

"Yeah?" he says, pulling back to look at her, to run his fingers through her curls.

"Yeah," she confirms. "I'm happy."

Mike smiles. "I'm glad."

And it's true. Lucas and Max are back together, slowly finding their

way back to normal and Jonathan and Nancy are back home. All is as it should be and it makes El happier than she knows what to do with.

“God, you two are still so damn cute, it’s sickening.”

Both Mike and El look up at the Wheeler household’s only other occupant at the moment. Nancy’s standing in the doorway, grinning and shaking her head with exasperation. “Ugh, go away, Nancy,” Mike says, but there’s no true heat in his voice.

El grins. “Hi, Nancy.”

Nancy glances at El. “Hey, El. And I’m going away. Just wanted to tell you that I’m going to hang out with Jon and Steve.”

Mike quirks an eyebrow. “Isn’t it weird that you spend all your time hanging out with your current boyfriend and your ex-boyfriend?”

There’s a twinkle in Nancy’s eye that makes El giggle. “I don’t need to explain myself to you, little brother.” She trills her fingers at them, waving. “Bye, you two. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!” Nancy winks at them before disappearing from the doorway.

“Um, ok,” Mike says slowly, gaze still locked on his now empty doorway. “That was weird. What’s up with her?”

El laughs. “You mean you haven’t guessed?”

Mike turns to look at her. “What do you mean?”

“She’s with Jon and Steve.”

Mike’s brows furrow. “Um, no, she’s on her way to see them and-”

El shakes her head, laughing. “No, Mike. She’s *with* Jon and Steve.”

Mike freezes. “Oh.” A pause. “*Oh.*”

El nods. “Yeah.”

“So, all three of them...?”

The look on Mike’s face is so adorably confused and grossed out at

the same time, it brings a smile to El's face. "Yep."

Mike nods, processing. "Huh," he says. "Wow, um, never thought my sister would be the person to be in a threesome, but if she's happy...." Mike shrugs. "Guess it's none of my business, though."

El kisses Mike's nose. "Good choice." She giggles, thought coming to mind. "You ever think about being in a threesome?"

Mike blushes, but he laughs. "Nuh-uh, nope, not falling for that trap," he says, hand sneaking between them to tickle along her side, making her squeal with laughter. "I mean, we haven't even had a *twosome*, yet, so I can't get too ahead of myself." He's grinning now. *Like an idiot*. "Besides, I don't want anyone other than you, so if there's a way to clone you, then maybe...."

El grabs the hand that's still trying to tickle her and laughs as she's rolling her eyes. "God, that was the stupidest, cheesiest answer I've ever heard." She pokes him in the ribcage, right where she knows it makes him squirm. "You know, I was thinking of having sex with you today, but now I'm not sure if I can be with someone so gooeey and schmoopy..." El says, making like she's about to get out of bed.

Mike lets out a very undignified whimper and starts to pull El back towards him. "No, wait," he whines. "Let me try again. I can do better."

El giggles and lets Mike pull her back. "Nope, sorry, lost your chance. Mood's gone. Try again tomorrow."

Mike trails a hand up El's spine, sending shivers throughout her entire body. "Maybe I can change your mind."

El smiles as she leans in close, her mouth inches from him. "You can try," she says, voice gone breathy, heart pounding. God, he's so close and the way he's looking at her makes her stomach flip and butterflies explode along every inch of her. And then he kisses her, all soft heat and breathless abandon and she thinks maybe, *maybe* he can change her mind.

He doesn't though. Not yet. They're not ready, but almost. Soon.

(it will be two months from now, a lazy saturday afternoon in the end of february, the two of them huddled up in their basement fort, her first home, the first place she ever felt safe. before he even gave her the choice of a name, he gave her a home and it's perfect for the first time she gives all of herself to him. it'll be a little awkward, as first times always are, but they'll figure it out soon enough, pressed skin to skin, bodies moving together as one, cradled by the softness of the blankets around them. the world outside the fort will cease to matter as they gasp and sigh and moan and giggle and love each other - it'll be good, so good. and after, when they're snuggled under the blankets, clothes still strewn around them, both of them happy and sated, she'll smile up at him, he'll smile back, and she'll fall in love with him all over again.)

Notes for the Chapter:

Whee, no cliffhangers! Hope you enjoyed this!

Now, I'm off to go get some sleep...

27. Jan - Nov 1988

Notes for the Chapter:

Alright, here we go again! Another chapter finished!

Guess which favorite couple of ours is fun, flirty, and *completely unable* to keep their hands off each other? (you get 3 guesses and the first 2 don't count ;))

Yeah, there's a *cough**theme**cough* to this chapter. See if you can figure it out...

Jan - Nov 1988

Day by day, junior year ticks down. The time passes with the steady beats of school and part time jobs, Party hangouts and date nights. All of this is accompanied by swim meets and baseball games and dance recitals and school plays and art exhibitions. They start turning 17 – El first, everyone following over the course of the following 5 months – almost adults now, their last year of childhood. They start talking about the next steps, about *college*, and they all know they can't bear to be apart from each other. They start talking about New York City, or Chicago, or Los Angeles – places with enough options that they can all guarantee they'll find something in the same city. They know they'll make this decision together, because that's what they do.

For Mike and El, the latter half of junior year is marked by one very important rite of passage: the first time they make love to each other. On that quiet February weekend afternoon, alone in the house, they take that last step into full intimacy. And they fall even more in love with each other. Being with each other that way, nothing between them, completely exposed and wholly together, bringing each other to new heights, is the ultimate physical expression of every way they love each other.

Of course, it's even harder for them to keep their hands off each other, even harder for them not to yearn to kiss or touch each other when they're in the same room, even harder to keep from falling into

the never-ending pool of love and desire that stretches between them and never come back out. This constant *want* expresses itself as an over-the-top schmoopiness that has everyone rolling their eyes, even if most of them don't know the exact reason for it, though Max and Will both know – Max because El tells her not long after, Will because he accidentally walks in on them (more on this later).

So, as junior year ends and summer begins – their last summer before graduation – the Party commits to spending as much time together as possible, happy and free, united by bonds of something deeper than friendship, born from everything they've gone through together, eager to hold on to the last of their childhood before college descends upon them, sharing everything.

Of course, there's one thing still that needs to be shared, one secret that still needs to be revealed.

And Will's almost ready.

It starts this way:

In June of 1988, Eric DeSanto graduates from Hawkins High, a full ride to UCLA tucked in his back pocket.

Will is happy for him – *ecstatic*, even – but there's a sadness underneath it all.

Because in two and half short months, Eric is going to go to California, leaving Indiana – leaving *Will* – behind. And they both know it.

When Eric first gets the acceptance letter, all the way back in March, the two of them ignore it and Will fights even harder to hide his emotions. He's used to it by now. He's been hiding Eric from the rest of the Party – not even El knows – and it's just one more thing to tuck away in the secret corner of his heart.

But, by July, it's impossible to ignore the elephant in the room any

longer.

"I'll be home on holidays, you know," Eric says one afternoon in the middle of July, a month and a half before he's due to start freshman orientation.

The two of them are lying in Castle Byers, sleeping bags underneath them, both of them naked except for a thin sheet that drapes over them. They're facing each other, heads resting on pillows, and Will smiles as he reaches out to tap Eric's sternum. "Yeah, but, you'll be gone for most of the year. And then I'll go off to college next year and, well...there's no guarantee I'll end up in LA, either." Will shrugs. "Besides, there's going to be a lot of people you'll meet in LA. You'll probably meet someone better."

Eric cuts Will off with a hard kiss, mouth hot against his, that ends just as it's getting started, leaving Will feeling out of breath. "Don't say that," Eric says. "There are only different people, Will. Not better. You're just as good as anyone else."

Will lets out a small laugh, but it sounds sad, bittersweet. "I appreciate the compliment, but the point about meeting other people still stands. I don't want to hold you back, especially when there are so many unknowns."

Eric frowns. "You could never hold me back. You know that, right?"

"I know," Will says – though, deep down, he really *doesn't* – and he shakes his head. "Just, I don't want us to make promises we can't keep."

Eric chuckles. "You and your 'promises'. That Party of yours is something, Will."

Will narrows his eyes playfully. "Hey, you making fun of my friends?"

Eric smiles. "Maybe. What are you going to do about it?"

Will pushes Eric so that he's lying on his back, Will shifting to lean over him. For a second, Will just drinks in the sight of the man lying beneath him and his chest feels too full. "Oh, I'm sure I'll think of

something,” Will says before he leans over the rest of the way, his lips crashing down on Eric’s.

And, for a while, there’s no more talking.

But that elephant is still in the room.

In the end, Will and Eric decide that they’ll still see each other when Eric comes home for the holidays, but that they’re both free to see other people when Eric’s away at school. Neither of them are happy about this, but Will feels less guilty about this decision. Because he really doesn’t want to hold Eric back, because he knows Eric’s going to meet someone amazing, because he knows that, eventually, Eric won’t come home during school breaks. And it’s better to start making the break now when there’s less Will has invested in this relationship, when it’s a little easier to get out and save his dignity.

Their last night together is bittersweet, filled with quiet tears and pleasurable smiles, the weight of finality draping over them through the ecstasy they draw from each other.

The next morning, Eric piles up into his parents’ car to start making the journey out to California, away from Indiana...away from Will.

And Will’s heart just *breaks*.

The house is quiet except for the sounds of their breathing and El can’t stop smiling. The sweet burn of spent pleasure is still swimming in her veins, endorphins making her limbs feel loose and floaty.

El and Mike lay in her bed, covers draped over their lower bodies, late morning sun filtering in through her windows and casting dappled shadows on the bare skin of their torsos. El snuggles up against Mike’s side, feeling his arm curve around her shoulders, and

she sighs.

She loves these moments, the moments after making love with him, both of them temporarily sated, passion subsiding to let soft intimacy take its place, all soft snuggles and gentle caresses and slow kisses.

El looks over at Mike from her vantage point, head pillowed on his shoulder. He's lying on his back, head tilted back just a bit to press fully into the pillow, eyes closed, a small, satisfied smile stretching his lips.

It's luck that finds El as the only occupant of the Hopper-Byers household earlier that morning – Joyce and Hop at work, Will off *somewhere* after leaving a note on the kitchen table. So, when El discovers this, of course she calls Mike over, eagerness filling both of them. He rushes over and, when she greets him at the bottom of the stairs, he immediately goes to her, picking her up, both of them all giddy smiles and heated gazes. Her legs wrap around his waist, and Mike walks them back towards the stairs as she leans over to kiss him, her hair falling like a curtain around their faces.

They're lucky they're able to make it to her room before their clothes started coming off, tumbling into bed moments later, the next 30 minutes lost in a haze of pleasure – confident caresses, hot kisses, tangled limbs, mattress shifting and creaking as they move together, the room filling with giggles and cries and moans, bodies arching as they find completion in each other.

And now El gets to just stare at Mike as she luxuriates in the post-coital afterglow. *God, he's just so **beautiful**.* All lean definition born from hours of cross country and swim practice, long limbs and soft skin. Her eyes rake over him, taking in the curve of his neck, the sweep of his collarbones, down across the lines of his torso, the ridges of muscle, hers, *all hers....*

El feels it again, feels the familiar stirring of desire low in her belly, spreading slowly through her limbs, making her heart race and her skin itch. *It's been at least 20 minutes. That's enough time, right?*

Turning her head, El presses a soft kiss to Mike's shoulder before she scrapes her teeth across the same spot. Mike sucks in a breath before

he cracks one eye open, smile growing wider. “Hi,” he says, voice low, *knowing*.

“Hi,” she says back, unable to keep the grin off her face, her chin resting on his arm.

“What are you doing?”

El giggles, body shifting so she can press another kiss, this time to the tip of his collarbone. “What does it look like?”

Mike lets out a laugh around the groan that bubbles up in his throat. “God, *again?*”

El arches an eyebrow. “You sound surprised. And I don’t know why you’re complaining. It’s not my fault you’re irresistible.” Another kiss, this one closer to his neck.

“It’s like you’ve never heard the term ‘refractory period’.”

El grins, laughing a bit, as she trails a hand down Mike’s chest, inching inexorably for the edge of the blanket that covers both of them. “I bet I can help you *rise* to the occasion.”

Mike lets out a snort that devolves into a laugh, even as El feels his breathing pick up. “Oh god, that’s the stupidest pun I’ve ever heard. That’s it, I’m revoking your pun license.”

Giggling, El swings a leg over Mike’s hips, body hovering above him. His hands go to her hips, holding her there, eyes sparkling with humor as he looks up at her. But El can see the passion that’s taking over him, can feel the way his breath hitches as she slowly lowers herself, pressing her torso against his. “What are you going to give me in return for giving up my pun license?” she asks, lowering her face so that her mouth is inches away from his, tossing her hair with a shake of her head so that it falls over one shoulder.

“Hmm,” Mike sighs. “I think the word ‘revoke’ indicates that there is no trade involved. The law’s on my side here, missy. Though, if you feel like *bribing* me, I’m sure we can work something out.” He’s grinning like an idiot, like she’s sure she is, too.

“Oh yeah?” El says, suddenly a bit short of breath. His thumbs are rubbing against the hollows of her hips in just the right way and it’s so *distracting*. “What would the terms of this agreement be?”

Mike chuckles, leaning up so his lips are just barely brushing against hers. “Well, why don’t you start with what your hand was doing just a few moments ago and we’ll go from there.”

“Hmm, I think that can be arranged,” El says, following through on his suggestion to the sound of Mike’s gasp. She kisses him, grinning against his lips, his mouth opening beneath hers. He moves and, suddenly, his hands are *everywhere* – brushing through her hair, tracing the lines of her torso, trailing up her thighs – and El feels herself getting lost in him once more, fast reaching the point of no return. The heat in her veins is *unbearable* and, soon, they’re moving together once more, bodies joining as one. And, like always, it’s so good – no, it’s *amazing*.

The door to her room opens and, for half a second, El doesn’t hear it. But she’s just realizing what’s happening when she hears Will’s voice. “Hey, I’m back. I saw Mike’s car and-” Mike and El quickly tear their lips away from each other’s, both of them looking towards the door where Will is frozen in terrified shock. Everything important is covered. El *knows* this – either by the blankets or by Mike’s hands. But, still, her heart leaps into her throat, very, *keenly* aware of where – and *how* – her and Mike are pressed against each other.

For a long moment, everyone’s frozen in a strange tableau. Then Will moves, hand coming up to cover his eyes. “Oh *god*, holy shit. Can’t unsee, *can’t unsee*.” Then he’s slamming the door behind him, running down the hall towards his room, the slamming of *that* door seconds later.

A couple moments go by and then Mike and El are giggling, laughing softly against each other even as mild horrified guilt creeps down the backs of their necks. “Oh my god,” El breathes through her laughter.

Mike chuckles. “Not usually the context in which you say that, but I’ll take it.”

El looks to glare at him, but Mike kisses her a half second later,

rolling both of them over as their passion reignites, picking up where they left off. They do their best to keep quiet, all muffled moans and soft sighs, cries swallowed by each other's lips as they tumble over the edge together.

And after, a few minutes later, both of them are struggling to calm their breathing, hearts pounding as they lay on their sides. El sighs and presses a soft kiss to Mike's chest. "I should probably go talk to him."

Mike sighs. "We both should."

El shakes her head. "No, me first. I'll come get you. He's been...weird recently."

Mike nods. "Yeah, I've noticed. I haven't tried asking him, but...."

El shakes her head, cutting him off. "He's not telling. Believe me, I've tried," El says. And, even through the haze of satisfied passion, El worries about her brother. He's been...not weird, but *sad*. Really sad, almost to the point of being angry. El has no idea what's causing it, but it's been this way for the past couple of weeks, as August begins the slide towards September.

So, El untangles herself from Mike and slides out of bed, hunting down the PJs she had been wearing that Mike had removed from her body over an hour ago.

"You can stay here," El says, eyeing him, enjoying the way Mike watches her as she moves naked about the room. "Don't fall asleep."

Mike sighs. "I won't," he says, smirking, propping one arm behind his head as he stares at her.

"Enjoying the view?" El says as she grabs her sleep shorts from the ground with the same hand that's also holding her tank top. She walks over to the bed and leans against it with her hip, reaching out for Mike with her free hand, his hand finding hers instantly.

"Always," he says, smiling softly. "You're beautiful."

That earns him a kiss, El leaning over to press her mouth against his,

both of them sighing. Moments later, El pulls away and starts getting dressed. "I'll be back in a bit."

And then she's slipping out the door, ready to apologize, hoping that Will's in a good enough mood to hear it.

There's a constant sound coming from Will's throat – a groan of disgust and horror that has no end – as he slams the door of his room and *throws* himself down on his bed. Never, in his entire, short life, has he wished *so hard* that brain bleach was a real thing. The images of what he just saw are seared in his brain – Mike and El, in her bed, her on top of him, his hands on her chest, bodies moving in that recognizable rhythm, *oh god, they're having sex, ew, ew, ew* – and he very suddenly wishes for a head injury or *something*. Something to erase what he's just seen (to say nothing of what he *heard and can still hear, Jesus Christ*).

The only thing that seems to help at the moment is sitting on his bed, heels of his palms pressed against his eyes, breathing deep to try and keep from dying of horror and embarrassment at walking in on his sister and best friend *doing it*.

Several minutes later and the embarrassment has mostly died down when Will hears a knock at his door. He sighs, knowing it's either Mike or El – or *both* – and there's no escaping what's about to happen. "Yeah," he says, tacitly inviting them in, *whoever* it is.

The door opens and El comes into view through the gap of the halfway-open door. "Hi, can I come in?"

Will eyes her, giving her a quick once over. El's cheeks are flushed, her hair wild and mussed, lips swollen. She's wearing a tank top and PJ shorts that do a horrible job of hiding the couple hickies Will can see – one on her neck, one (*oh dear god*) high on inner curve of her thigh – and Will feels his stomach twist and lurch. "I guess," Will says, gesturing with a quick jerk of his head for her to enter.

El pushes the door open the rest of the way and steps just inside, leaning on the door jamb, both hands tucked behind her back. “So, um...” She trails off, one hand coming up to tuck her hair behind her ears, looking down for a brief second. “I wanted to apologize. For what you saw. You – it probably wasn’t what you wanted to see.”

Will snorts. “That’s putting it mildly.” His stomach is *churning* now and Will’s starting to feel the skin along his spine prickle and burn, settling in the base of his skull, the back of his neck.

El nods, biting her lip. “I didn’t think we’d still be...you know. I called him over when I saw your note. I didn’t know where you were, but, well, suddenly I had the house to myself, and, you know....”

Will nods, understanding what she’s getting at. He’d gone out for a walk before ending up at Castle Byers, wallowing in the hints of Eric’s presence that linger in the small space. He’d been gone for a while, though, and from the sounds of it, Mike had come over not long after he left. Will gulps, stomach souring, heart beginning to pound. Suddenly, he wants out of this conversation. He wants to be *alone*. “No, I get it,” he says, tone short, trying to discourage El from talking further.

But El keeps talking. “It’s just...my bed beats being in his car, you know? So, um, anyway, I’m sorry. Next time, I’ll lock the door.”

Next time, Will’s brain echoes. *In her bed*. God, that’s a luxury that Will’s never dreamed of. He and Eric had never *dared* to be intimate in either of their beds for fear of getting caught, having to hide – *always* having to hide.

It’s not fair. The thought crystalizes in Will’s head, the feeling in his stomach given a name and a weight: envy – heavy, white hot, *nauseating* – swirling in his stomach, coating his veins, making his skin buzz.

Goddammit, it’s *not fair*. Mike and El get to have this amazing, passionate, all-encompassing relationship out in the open, where everyone can see how much they love each other, where they can hold hands and kiss each other in public, where the most they have to worry about is the embarrassment at getting caught having sex.

Will, on the other hand, has so much more to worry about than embarrassment – public shame, dirty looks and sneers, fearing for his safety.... No, he's stuck in the closet, having to hide his relationship. God, he couldn't even bring himself to tell El or Jonathan, the only two people who know he's gay, because he didn't want to burden them with covering up for him.

And now Eric's gone, and Will's left in the figurative closet, back to shouldering this burden *alone*.

Will looks at El, anger at how unfair it all is mixing with his envy and he glares. "Get out," he says, unable and unwilling to be part of this conversation anymore.

El blinks, rearing back a bit. "What?"

"I said, get out!" Will yells, fists clenching in the blankets beneath him.

Worry is starting to spread on El's face. "Will, I'm sorry – I- "

But Will doesn't want to hear any of it anymore. "God, don't you know how *lucky* you are?" Will gets to his feet. "I can't imagine it having it that easy."

El's eyes are widening, her face going pale. "Will, I-"

"Hey, what's going on?"

Will looks just past El to see Mike standing in the hallway, wearing only boxers and jeans, which aren't even zipped up all the way. *Like he got dressed in a hurry*. He's looking between El and Will with concern on his face – forehead furrowed beneath wild hair, frown tugging down on lips that are still swollen from El's kisses.

Tears spring to Will's eyes as a whole host of emotions collide and merge together: heartache over the loss of Eric, anger at the unfairness of all, embarrassed annoyance at catching Mike and El *mid-fuck*, like they have no care in the world, like they have no idea how hard it is for other people.

"Great," Will scoffs. "Just rub it in, why don't you? God, I can't even

look at the two of you right now. I'm leaving."

And then, purposefully not listening to the concerned protests and worried words coming from El and Mike, Will pushes past both of them and practically runs out the front door, tears streaming down his cheeks, feeling like nothing's going to be right ever again.

Mike stares at the spot where he last saw Will before he disappeared down the stairs, mouth hanging open slightly. Any and all orgasmic afterglow has completely faded, leaving confused concern in its place. It's not like he's never seen Will mad, or anything – given the right circumstance, Will's the scariest one of all of them.

But this was...unusual, concerning. Mostly because Mike has no idea where this is coming from.

So, he looks over at El-

(for a split second, drinking in the sight of her, all sex-mussed hair and swollen lips, barely dressed in a thin tank top and tiny sleep shorts, looking beautiful in all the ways that makes his heart always skip a beat)

-And frowns at the look on her face. Because, while El is concerned, she looks nowhere near as confused as Mike feels.

"What was that about?" Mike asks.

El looks at him, frowning slightly. "I think he's jealous."

Mike rears back a bit, eyebrows furrowing. "What, that he doesn't have a girlfriend?"

At that, El lets out a laugh, the sound knowing and wry, tinged with sadness. "No, no, that's not it."

Mike narrows his eyes at El. "What aren't you telling me, El?"

"It's not my secret to tell," El says, sighing. She steps forward and

wraps her arms around Mike, pressing her cheek against his bare chest. Mike's arms automatically wrap around her, folding her into his embrace, as easy as breathing. "I'm going to give him a while to cool off and then I'm going to find him."

"Ok," Mike says, turning his head so that his chin is propped on the top of her head. "You mind if I stay around? If he wants to talk? I want to help."

El shakes her head and Mike feels it. "No, I don't mind. Probably a good idea. At least, no harm in it, at any rate."

"Ok, good. That's settled," Mike says with a nod. "C'mon, while we wait, let's go shower and grab something to eat."

El pulls back, looking up at him with an eyebrow arched, a smile pulling up at the corners of her lips. "Showering together? This from Mr. 'Refractory Period'?" she teases, poking him in the ribcage in the way that makes him squirm every time she does it.

"Hey!" Mike says with a low laugh. "I never said anything about having sex in the shower. That's all on you and your dirty mind."

El snorts as they start making their way to the bathroom. "Uh-huh, sure," she draws out. "You cannot tell me you weren't thinking about that."

"Please, I'm a pure, innocent angel," Mike says, grinning at the way El's eyes roll.

"I have a hickey on my thigh that says otherwise, Mr. Wheeler," El says, eyebrows waggling in a way that makes Mike laugh as they enter the bathroom.

"Got me there. Still, said nothing about shower sex."

Except they totally end up having sex in the shower. Mike's not complaining, though – why would he? And he *certainly* doesn't hear El complaining, either.

Still doesn't stop them from teasing each other about it as they eat afterwards, fully dressed, hair wet, all easy smiles and gentle kisses.

Eventually, maybe 45 minutes after Will storms out, El lets out a soft sigh from where she's sitting at the kitchen table. "Ok, I'm going to go talk to him."

"I'd ask if you need help finding him, but...." Mike trails off with a shrug and a smile.

El smiles back. "Be back later. Think you can amuse yourself while I'm gone?"

Mike chuckles. "I'll just go take a nap in your room. You wore me out, forcing me to keep up with your insatiable demand." His smile has turned into what he knows is a shit-eating grin and he doesn't care.

El rolls her eyes, which is the exact thing he was going for. "Please, like you weren't a willing participant." She stands up and leans over to press a quick kiss to his lips. "See you in a bit. Love you."

"Love you, too."

El doesn't even need to slip into the Void to find Will. She knows where he is.

Her feet carry her almost on auto pilot to Castle Byers. El barely comes out here these days and neither does the rest of the Party – really, it's too small for all 6 of them now that they're fully grown – so it's reverted back to Will's space. El knows Will has been spending a lot of time out here over the last several months, pretty much since Dustin started dating Megan. She figured that Will was getting fed up with watching everyone form into couples around him – and maybe that's still part of it. But El's starting to think that something *else* is going on, something Will has been keeping from everyone, including her. Because the way that Will snapped at her is *not* just simple jealousy and every inch of her gut tells her that there's something more.

It only takes about 5 minutes to get out to Castle Byers, the small cabin coming into view through the trees, and El pauses for half a second to take in a deep, steadying breath. She hopes she did the right thing by giving him some time to cool off – maybe she should have run after him, maybe she shouldn't have spent the last almost hour with Mike – but there's no taking it back now.

El walks the last bit of distance between her and Castle Byers, ground crunching underfoot. Within moments, she's kneeling by the closed door and reaching out with one hand, knuckles rapping against the wooden surface. "Will, I know you're in there," she says, making sure to keep her voice steady and calm. "I...I just want to talk, make sure you're all right, ok? Can, um, can I come in?"

There's a long silence and, for half a second, El thinks that maybe she was wrong, that maybe Will *isn't* in Castle Byers. But then, there's the sound of someone sniffing loudly followed soon by Will's voice. "Yeah, you can come in." Will's voice is shaky, full of tears. El feels her heart twist in her chest as she opens the door and ducks inside.

The first thing she notices, besides Will sitting in the middle of the cabin, is the two sleeping bags lying on the ground, both unzipped and lying on top of each other to form a large, double sleeping bag. There are a handful of pillows and a folded up sheet in the corner. El thinks she's starting to put the pieces together, but she's not entirely sure yet.

Then she looks at Will, focusing on him, and her heart just *breaks*. He's crying, ruddy tear tracks having carved paths down his cheeks, as he looks at her with a gut-wrenching mixture of guilt and sadness. El gasps, tears coming to her own eyes, and she rushes forward. "Will, what's wrong?"

Will sniffles again, lips wobbling, and he shakes his head. "I'm sorry," he says, voice breaking. "I'm so sorry."

El swallows roughly and shakes her head, rushing to scoot over so she can hug him, pulling him tight against her. Will instantly wraps his arms around hers, burying his face into her shoulder. "You have nothing to be sorry for," El says, cupping the back of his head with one hand while the other rubs soothingly up and down his back. "It's

ok, Will. Whatever happened, it's ok."

Will sobs against her shoulder. "I just miss him so much," he chokes out.

Will's words spark a complex swirl of emotion to bloom in her chest – protectiveness, sadness, anger, frustration. *Someone hurt Will, someone he didn't tell her about, someone he was in love with? Someone who made him cry.* El sucks in a deep breath, trying to keep control of her emotions. "Who, Will? Who do you miss?"

The question only makes Will cry harder and hold her tighter, which means El only hugs him all the harder in return. For a while, neither of them speak, Will in mourning over something and El taking in the emotion pouring from her brother, keeping him safe and loved.

Eventually, though, Will's sobs quiet, his tears slow. But El and Will are still hugging, neither willing to let the other go. El swallows against the dryness in her throat, and speaks. "Do you want to tell me about it?" she asks, voice croaking, her fingers brushing through his hair.

Will tenses, but he sighs and pulls back a little. El lets him go until she can look at him and she sucks in a shocked breath at the misery on Will's face. "Do you...do you remember Eric DeSanto?"

El blinks, a little taken aback. But a face pops into her mind's eye at Will's question regardless of her confusion. "I think so?" El has a handful of memories of seeing an older boy – dark hair, tan skin, taller than her, not as tall as Mike – in the Art classroom. "Year ahead of us? Always in the Art room?"

Will nods, sighing. "Yeah, that's him. He and I were seeing each other." El's eyes widen and her jaw drops. What...? "In secret. No one knew, I swear," Will hurries to say.

Urgent curiosity fills her and El grabs Will's hands, squeezing tight. "Tell me everything."

And so Will does, telling her about how he fell in love with Eric, about how they got together at Stacey's party back in November,

about how they would come out to Castle Byers to be alone, to be with each other where no one would catch them, where they would talk and make out and smoke pot and, eventually, have sex. He tells her about how Eric was his first *everything* – first kiss, first hickey, first lover, first love of his life. And finally, he tells her about how Eric got accepted to UCLA, about how Eric moved away to California only a couple of weeks ago...about how they both agreed to be together, but only on holidays, that they're free to see other people when Eric's away at school.

"...but I know I won't find anyone here in Hawkins, Ellie," Will says, breath hitching. "And he's going to meet all these amazing men and I'm going to be stuck here, *alone*."

"No, Will," El says, shaking her head. "You're not alone. You're *not*."

Will levels a look at her, all withering and flat. "You know what I mean, El. It was luck I found another gay guy here *at all*. It's just...." Will trails off with a thick sigh. "I'm already so *lonely*. You and Mike have each other, and then there's Lucas and Max, and Dustin's still with Megan and...I'm just stuck by myself."

El tilts her head, still confused. "But, if you care this much about him, why don't you fight to be with him? And I know, *I know*, he's in California, it would be long-distance. But, why don't you *try*?"

Will lets out a sad laugh. "What happens when I go off to college, then? The odds of me going out to LA are almost non-existent, and you know it." Will sighs and pulls back, leaning against one of the walls. "It's just easier to do this now. Like ripping off a bandaid. And, yeah, I'll probably see him at Christmas and it'll be nice to be together if he's not seeing anyone else but...I'm preparing to let him go forever."

El thinks she gets it. *Less pain now versus more pain later*. "Someday, you'll find someone who you won't need to rip the bandaid off for," she says, sad and quiet. "I promise."

Will smiles, but it's half-hearted, diminished by the eyes red and swollen from his earlier tears. "Thanks." There's a moment, a brief silence, before Will cringes. "Is Mike mad at me? For snapping at you

guys like that?"

El smiles, trying to be reassuring. "No, he's just worried about you," El says. "He's waiting at the house just in case you wanted to talk." She bites her lip, thought coming to mind. "Have you...have you given any thought about telling the others? That you're gay?"

El can tell the way panic floods Will by the way his shoulders tense, the way his chest hitches. "W-why?" Will asks, eyeing her uncertainly.

El looks down for a brief second, gathering her thoughts. "It just...they'd want to know. So they could help. Mike knows there's something wrong and he wants to help. This way, you wouldn't have to feel so alone, even if you're single, because our friends would know." El pauses at the way Will pales. "You don't have to," El rushes to say. "It's just a thought."

Will gulps, the skin between his eyebrows furrowing in worry. "Do you...do you think I should? Do you think they'd understand?"

El lets out a low, breathy laugh. "They love you, Will. They might not understand, but they love you like I love you. And you should tell them, but only if you're ready."

Will looks away, nodding, like he's considering what she said. After a moment, he locks eyes with her once more. "Maybe-" He stops, gulping. "Maybe just Mike. For now," he hurries to clarify. "The others...later. When I'm ready." Will reaches out for her, hand trembling and El takes it without hesitation, squeezing. "Do you think he'll be ok with it? I've been lying for so long, El. I just-"

"Hey, *no*," El says. "He'll understand. I *know* it. And you know it, too. But I understand, it's scary." El shrugs. "And, if it makes you feel any better, he knows about Nancy, Steve, and Jonathan and he's fine with that. So I don't know why he'd be horrified or angry about you being gay."

Will lets out a breath. "That...oddly enough makes me feel a bit better." Will smiles, the expression genuine, though there's still a lot of fear and sadness lurking behind it. "Thanks, El."

El smiles. "Anytime." She giggles. "C'mon, let's go. Mike's waiting for us back at the house. But, only tell him if you're ready, yeah? You don't have to just because I said so."

Will squares his shoulders, looking a bit more confident – like, now that he's made the decision, he's not backing down or second guessing himself. "No, I want to talk to him." He sighs. "I'm tired of hiding, anyway. Even if it's just to Mike, at least someone else will know. And that'll be nice, I think."

El nods, happiness filling her. "It will be. Alright, time to head back. I'll let him know we're coming."

Will gives her a look as they exit Castle Byers, El closing the door behind them with her powers, reaching out to Mike with a *We're coming back to the house, now*. "You know, I'll never get used to you and Mike being able to talk to each other with your minds," Will says, chuckling.

"You're just jealous," El teases. "Besides, if I worked at it hard enough, I could talk to you the same way."

Will makes a gagging sound. "Please, I'd rather walk in on you two having sex again than have you mucking around in my brain," he says, laughing. "My brain, my space."

El blushes and hits Will on the shoulder. "Hey! Don't I get any say in this? I'd rather you not walk in on me and Mike like that."

Will sticks out his tongue. "Then remember to lock the door next time." Will laughs, El joining him a second later. And though El knows Will's only teasing with her as a distraction from all his other emotions – his sadness, his fear, his *worry* – it's still nice to hear him laughing, still nice to know her brother's going to be alright. Because if Will can laugh with her and tease her, then El knows he'll be ok. And, yes, it hurts now, but he'll come out the other side older and wiser.

He's stronger than he knows. Even if he doesn't think so.

It's warm outside, but the porch swing, shaded by the awing above, is cool enough to be almost comfortable. Mike stretches out on the wooden bench, one foot on the ground to occasionally push the swing. He's staring out onto El's front yard, not really looking at anything as he waits.

He'd been dozing when El reached out to him with her mind. He hadn't been lying, El wore him out-

(really not complaining. making love to el is one of the most amazing things he's ever experienced and, well, the fact that she wants to have sex with him as often as she does, that she seems to want him just as much as he wants her, if not more, is more than he ever could have hoped for.)

-but he pushed himself out of her bed when he heard her voice in his mind. And, if that hadn't done it, her words a few minutes later would have. *He wants to talk to you*, she had said. *Just...listen to him, ok? He's scared, even though he's putting on a brave face.*

By this point, Mike was already heading down stairs. *Is everything ok?*

Yes and no, El had replied. *You'll find out in just a few minutes.*

So, now Mike's waiting, knowing Will's getting closer because Mike can feel El getting closer. And he's thinking, trying to imagine what it is Will wants to talk about other than the obvious – about what's bothering him. And it's bothering *Mike* that he can't guess what it is. At the same time, Mike is filled with the urge to help, no matter what. Because it's *Will*, who's practically his brother. Who *will* be his brother, one day, when he and El get married (*when, not if, if that tin in his closet has anything to say about it*).

And, yeah, it's a little frustrating not knowing what or how to help Will, but Mike knows he'd do just about anything for Will, so, in the end, it doesn't really matter what. Mike's just happy Will wants to talk, wants to tell him what's wrong.

A few minutes later and Mike hears the sounds of Will and El talking as they come up on the side of the house. He doesn't move, he just listens to their voices, not caring what the words are – Will's voice

clear but deeper, El's throatier and a bit higher. To Mike, there's almost nothing more soothing than the sounds of the people he cares about the most, happy and safe, and it makes Mike's heart thump almost painfully in his chest.

And then they come around the corner and Mike smiles. "Hey, guys," he calls out, waving as he stands. He waits at the top of the porch steps and watches as they walk towards him. "Everything ok?"

El smiles. "Yeah, mostly," she says. "I'm going to go inside while you talk." She turns to Will, grabbing him by the arm. "You gonna be ok doing this on your own?" The question makes Mike's stomach do a weird, worried flip. *What's going on?* He asks El, but she ignores him, keeping her focus on Will.

Will smiles and it's a little shaky, like he's trying to psych himself up for something. "Yeah, I'll be fine. Thanks, sis."

El gives Will one last smile before she approaches Mike, standing on her toes to reach up for a kiss. Mike leans down without a second thought, letting the softness of her lips brush against his for what feels like a blissful eternity of a moment (*he lives whole lifetimes in these moments, lifetimes with her, just her*).

Then she's pulling away, slipping inside the house, Mike watching her go like he literally can't look away, like he can't do anything else.

Beside him, stepping up onto porch, Will laughs, though the sound's a little humorless and a lot exasperated. "You two are ridiculous, you know that, right?"

Mike turns back to Will and shrugs, smiling a little. "Sorry," he says (he's so not sorry). "It's just...I love her, you know?"

Will snorts, but he's smiling, too. "*Everyone* knows that, Mike."

Mike lets out a chuckle before he sighs and looks down at Will. He has at about 4 or 5 inches on Will, so he's always *literally* looking down. "So, um, what did you want to talk about?" Mike turns to look at the porch swing. "We can sit, if you want. Or, I don't know, we can take a walk? I know you were just walking, so maybe not that, but,

really, whatever you-”

Will laughs a little, comforting, trying to put Mike at ease, trying to stop the rambling. “God, I can’t believe I’m the one trying to calm *you* down, but it’s ok. We can sit.”

Mike nods, a little uncertain what to do next, what to say. “So, um,” he says as he settles on one end of the porch swing, facing Will as he sits down, one leg folded up, the other extended with his foot on the ground. “What is it you wanted to talk about? Is everything ok?”

Mike watches as Will settles across from him, mirroring Mike’s posture. Will sighs, looking down at his lap, hands folded in front of him. He picks at his fingers, one of Will’s nervous habits, and Mike just wants to know so he can help. “Whatever it is, you can tell me,” Mike continues. “I promise, I won’t-”

Whatever Mike was going to word vomit gets lost as Will holds up a hand, palm facing Mike, imploring him to *stop*. “Mike, it’s ok. Just... just listen, ok?”

Mike nods and draws in a deep breath. “Ok,” is all he says before he shuts his mouth, making a point to press his lips together. El asked him to just listen, and he hasn’t been able to manage that so far. He can do this, though, he *swears*.

Will breathes deep, chest expanding as he tries to calm himself or gather courage or *both*, Mike’s not sure. There’s a long moment where Will doesn’t say anything as he looks back at Mike, the two of them staring each other. Mike can see the uncertainty play across Will’s face, can see the beginnings of panic, of indecision – *where to start?* – but Mike waits, waits for Will to find the words he wants to say even if sitting there silently is a kind of torture that’s only effective for one Mike Wheeler.

“So, um, I guess I’ll start with what happened,” Will says, voice shaking a bit. “Um, I was seeing someone” – Mike’s eyes widen in shock. *Excuse me?* – “But, they moved away for college a couple of weeks ago.”

Mike’s attempt to just listen lasts all of 15 seconds. “Wait, you had a

girlfriend? And an *older* girlfriend?”

Will lets out a laugh that sounds a little tinged with panic and he shakes his head. “No, Mike. I didn’t have a girlfriend.” Will pauses, taking in a deep, if shaky, breath. “His name was Eric.”

For a moment, Mike doesn’t know how to process the words Will just spoke. *Wait, didn’t have a...his name...what?* His brows knit together in confusion. “Wait, are you saying...?”

Will nods, face going pale with worry. “I’m gay, Mike.” There’s a tremor to Will’s voice as he says this, but he holds Mike’s gaze regardless, managing to keep his head held high, like he’s expecting the worst and wants to brace himself for it.

But Mike’s still processing. “Oh.” He pauses, thinking, letting the words sink in. “*Oh.*” Will’s gay. Ok, yeah. “Huh,” he says, nodding.

Wow, so much is starting to make sense – mostly that Will’s never shown *any* interest in girls, not even a cursory one. Mike had always thought Will wasn’t ready for a girlfriend, that he was waiting for *something*. But, this...wow, this makes sense.

But then a horrible thought occurs to Mike and he feels like he might be sick. “Oh, *god.*” He doesn’t miss the way Will flinches, but Mike barrels on through. “I haven’t done anything, to like, offend you, or anything, have I?”

Will sighs, relaxing. “Mike, it’s-”

“Because, I swear, it’s the last thing I want to do-”

“Mike.”

“And it’s fine that you like guys, like it’s just who you are-”

“*Mike.*”

“And I never, *never* want to make you feel bad about being who you are-”

“*Michael.*”

“So, you *need* to tell me if I’ve ever made you feel uncomfortable or-”

Will reaches out and claps a hand over Mike’s mouth. “Michael Wheeler, *I swear to god*. Stop. Talking.”

Mike’s eyes widen and he shuts his mouth – anything he would have wanted to say would have been muffled by Will’s hand – and takes a deep breath. Will removes his hand a moment later and Mike sighs, blushing over his outburst of worry. “Sorry. I just...you’d tell me, right?”

Will lets out a laugh. “You’re fine, Mike. You’ve never said anything to offend me or make me uncomfortable at all.” Will pauses, biting down on his lower lip. “And, you’re really ok with it? That I’m gay?”

Mike smiles a bit, shrugging. “I mean, I’m not sure I entirely understand, or anything. But it’s just who you are, right? Like, you didn’t choose it, or anything. And you’ve been my best friend for *years* and this is just part of you.” Mike takes in a deep breath, voice going serious. “I mean, you’re my brother, you know that, right? You could be a space alien from Mars and I’d still love you.”

There’s a sheen of tears in Will’s eyes. “Yeah?”

Mike’s smile widens, feeling himself enter into familiar territory. “Yeah, of course. After everything we’ve been through? You’d have to fight to get rid of me.”

There’s a half a beat of silence before Will’s launching himself at Mike in a hug. Mike hugs him back without hesitation. It’s just *Will*, the same person he’s known since Kindergarten, for 12 years. Will being gay is just another part of who he is. “Thank you,” Will says.

Mike’s not entirely sure what Will is thanking him for – for not being mad, for understanding, for any of it or all of it – but Mike smiles as they separate. “Any time. Thanks for telling me. I know it probably wasn’t easy.”

Will lets out a shaky laugh. “Um, you’re only the third person I’ve told. Jonathan and El are the others.”

Mike nods, thinking. “Joyce doesn’t know?”

Will's eyes narrow in consideration. "I think she suspects. But I haven't told her yet, no. It hasn't come up, yet."

"Yeah, I can see that," Mike says. "You should, though. I think she'd like to know. The Party, too." Mike stops, realizing he might be coming across as pushy, and he cringes "Sorry, it's your life. You should tell whoever you want."

Will shakes his head with a chuckle. "God, you and El are so damn similar. She was worried about almost the same thing, like 20 minutes ago."

Mike grins. "Well, she and I have been together for almost 4 years now. Our thoughts were bound to merge together at some point."

Will snorts. "In this case, the word '*literally*' applies here."

Mike laughs. "Yeah, it does." A thought pops into his head and Mike grins. "So, do you, like, need a wingman, or anything? I mean, not in *Hawkins*, but, like, when we go away to college."

Will rolls his eyes. "Mike, oh my god, *no*."

Mike's grin only widens. "What, you think I can't do it? I could be a *great* wingman if I wanted to."

Will groans, burying his face in his hands. "I don't know if I'd pay good money to see that or pay *you* good money to never try."

Mike laughs again, shaking his head. He sobers a second later, remembering something else Will told him. "So, um, this guy you were seeing? He moved away for school? And you broke up?"

Will lifts his head from his hands, frowning, sadness tugging at his features. "Yeah, kind of. I mean, maybe we'll hook up when he comes home for the holidays, but we agreed we could see other people. But he's in LA and I'm *here* and, well...." Will shrugs. "I think he got the better half of that deal."

Mike cringes. "That sucks, man." Mike breathes deeply. "You wanna tell me about him?"

Will smiles through the sadness and shakes his head. “Nah, just went through all that with El. She can tell you all about it, if you really want to hear it. I just don’t know how much more I wanna talk about him right now.”

Mike nods, lips pursing. “Cool, cool, I get it.” Mike gets another idea and smiles. “Wanna head inside and watch a movie? I’m sure we can convince El to watch something non rom-com.”

Will rolls his eyes. “Please, you secretly love those romantic movies. I’ve seen you tear up when the guy gets the girl, Michael Wheeler. You can’t get anything past me.”

Mike blushes fiercely as they stand up from the porch swing. “Fine, see if I do anything nice for you ever again, Byers. You just lost my wingman services.”

Will lets out an over-the-top gasp. “Oh, *no!* How *ever* will I go on?”

“You’re devastated, I can tell,” Mike says with a smile.

“Completely,” Will says as they go inside, voice deadpan. “You can’t see it, but I’m emotionally ruined by your refusal of wingman services.”

“Ha! That’s what I thought! You’ll come crawling back one day, you’ll see.”

“Keep dreaming, Wheeler. Keep dreaming.”

*(a week after will comes out to mike, with only a handful of days until the start of their last year of high school, he comes out to the rest of the party. there’s a little bit of awkwardness, which is only to be expected – and some wild questions from dustin which only merit an eye roll from will – but the rest of the party takes it well. in the end, will is still **will**, still their brother, their friend, the piece that makes them complete, and they will never **not** love him, never not consider him to be one of them. for will, it’s more than he could ever hope for and a breath of fresh air all at the same time, this feeling of relief, of no longer having to hide who he is from the people closest to him, of knowing they still love him regardless of who he loves. it’s the greatest feeling in the world.)*

Senior year starts with the excited gravitas of knowing this is finally their last year of high school...but also, *oh my god*, it's their *last year of high school*. This is the last time memorizing their Hawkins High class schedule, last time coordinating lunches and rides to school, their last time walking through the halls of Hawkins High on the first day of school, fresh from summer vacation. This time next year, they'll be off at college, and the thought is scary and exciting all at the same time.

As it always does, the frenzy of the first day of school dies down into the tedium of the day to day – classes, homework, tests, projects, extracurriculars. Only, this time, there's something new added to the mix: preparing for the SATs and filling out college applications, all mountains of paperwork and #2 pencils.

A month into the school year finds Mike and El sitting in the Wheeler basement, piles of unfilled college applications surrounding them as they sit on the floor. They're sitting next to each other, turned halfway towards each other as they sit in front of the couch – Mike sitting cross-legged, El with one of her legs thrown over Mike's bent knee, the other stretched out in front of her.

El looks at the spread of papers around them, all waiting for them to be filled out, and sighs. She and Mike are separating the applications by the kinds of personal statements each college is asking for – “tell us about a time when you faced adversity and how did you overcome it?”, “what makes you an ideal candidate for our institution?”, or “if you could redo one decision you've made, what would it be and why?” – all so they can minimize how many times they have to answer the same question.

El picks up the application packet for University of Chicago and flips through the papers inside until she gets to the personal statement page. After a quick glance, she puts the paper back in the packet and hands the whole thing over to Mike. “Put this one in the ‘adversity’ pile.”

Mike takes the packet and glances at the cover. "University of Chicago? Isn't this one of your top choices?"

El nods. "Yeah, they have a pretty great History and Literature program." Never mind that it's within a couple of miles of the Chicago Art Institute, which is where Will wants to go, and not much further than that from Northwestern University, which is Mike's top choice. The Party has settled on Chicago on the city of choice for them to go away to school – far enough away to feel like adults, big enough to have a wealth of schools to choose from, and still close enough to Hawkins to come home on a somewhat regular basis (yes, it's a 3 and half hour drive, but it's better than the miles Nancy and Jonathan need to travel to come home from New York).

Still, El's spent a lot of time thinking about what she wants to do after high school. And while she's not entirely sure what she wants, she knows she wants it to be something to do with history and literature. After spending the first 12 years of her life in total isolation, with another year of partial isolation, El lives for stories and knowledge about the world, about the people, where they've been, where they're going, endlessly fascinated with the stretches of history that lay behind her. She also dearly loves the smell of books, loves paging through thick tomes, all filled with words and knowledge that wait for her to absorb them.

Sometimes El thinks she's going to be a historian; others, a librarian. Regardless, El knows that her future lies in the pages of the past, both fiction and non-fiction.

Mike, meanwhile, is angling to become an engineer, fascinated by the science and the application of it. Privately, El thinks he'd be a better teacher, but his future is for him to decide and, as long as Mike is happy and El is by his side, El will support him no matter what he decides to do.

El reaches for another pamphlet – this one for Northeastern Illinois – and sighs when she pulls it onto her lap.

Mike pauses his own sorting and looks over at her, frowning a bit. "You ok?" he asks, voice soft.

El looks at him and smiles, hopefully reassuring. “Yeah, just...it’s a lot, you know? Applying to schools, figuring out where we’re gonna be, where we’re gonna live. Next year this time, we’ll be anywhere but here and....” El trails off with a shrug. “It’s a lot of unknowns.”

Mike smiles and reaches for her, hand landing on her thigh, just above her knee, giving the spot a comforting squeeze. “Yeah, it is, but we’ll be together – you, me, the whole Party. We’ll be ok. Nothing else matters as long as we’re together.”

El smiles even wider, sighing with content relief. “Yeah, I know.” She shifts, putting the packet in her hands aside, and leverages herself so that she’s sitting across Mike’s folded legs, knees on either side of his thighs, her weight resting on his knees. Her hands clasp behind his neck, fingers sliding in to the hair at the nape of his neck. “Sorry I’m worrying over this. It’s just...scary. So, thank you. For reminding me what’s important.”

Mike’s hands go to her hips, thumbs drawing soothing patterns low on her torso. “Any time,” he says, smiling brilliantly. “I love you, El. No matter what happens, that’ll never change.”

Mike says the words in a low voice, quiet and intimate, speaking in the way that he reserves for her, only for her. El feels her heart melt, her body infusing with happiness. “I love you, too. Always,” she whispers. She leans over and kisses him, fireworks going off just under her skin, making everything feel electric. The feeling only intensifies when he kisses her back all but instantly. The feeling of his mouth on hers is the kind of familiar she rediscovers anew with breathless wonder every day, each time like the first time – all excitement and wonder and *mind-blowing*.

So, El does the only thing she can do.

She kisses him harder.

El’s mouth slants over Mike’s, lips parting against his, her breath mingling with his as their tongues brush against each other with soft caresses. One of Mike’s hands leaves her hips to cup the back of her head, fingers tangling with her hair, as his mouth angles even harder against her own, causing both of them to groan.

Her blood pumps in her veins, desire pools low in her belly, and El finds herself shifting forward until her hips meet his and – god, yes.

A bit of sobriety hits her like a lightning bolt and El pulls back with a gasp, biting her lip at the sight of Mike looking at her enraptured, gaze darkening, on the edge of devouring her. “Your mom and sister are upstairs,” she says, low and husky, almost a whisper. “And we still have to sort through these applications.”

Mike grins. “Hey, you crawled into my lap and kissed me. I didn’t force you here,” he says, hand on her hip giving the flesh a squeeze through the denim of her jeans. He leans in presses a soft, but hot, so *hot*, kiss against the side of her neck, lips tugging at the skin just above her pulse point, and El can’t help the way she arches against him. “Fort’s right over there,” he says, words ghosting against her skin. “We’ll be quiet.”

El’s fingers tighten in Mike’s hair, her whole body buzzing with anticipation, tempered just a bit by the desire not to get caught. “We could use the Void,” El says. “Looks like we’re napping if we’re caught.” If there’s one benefit of the Void, it’s that they can be together without someone walking in on them. And it’s almost as good as being together in real life, with the bonus of being a lot less messy.

Mike laughs, a little breathless. “Can’t believe we’re bargaining about sex, but...deal. Only if you make it up to me when I drive you home later, though.”

El giggles. “Deal,” she breathes. And then they’re off, rushing to get into the fort in a cloud of giddy laughter, happy together. In the Void, lying next to each other in real life, they love each other in all the ways they’ve learned how over the past year – together, *always together*.

Eventually, temporarily sated, they get back to sorting the college applications, all giggles and knowing smiles and quick, soft kisses, taking way longer than necessary as they keep getting distracted by each other.

El stays for dinner and, after, Mike drives her home, pulling off to the

side of the road just past the house, parking among a thicket of trees. They have each other again in the front seat of the car, skin to skin for real this time, all desperate gasps and pleasure-filled cries, mouths hot against lips and skin, hands touching each other with searing, all-encompassing love as they move against each other, with each other, finding *everything* in each other's embrace.

They finally part a while later, whispering words of love through gentle kisses as Mike walks her to the front door, promising to see each other later in the Void for sleep.

He goes, reluctantly, neither of them wanting to be physically separated, both of them knowing that, eventually, there'll be a day when they don't have to be apart any longer.

With Party all but settled on going to college in Chicago, there's one thing left to do, one college rite of passage they need to make sure to check off: college campus visits. They have lists of which ones they want to hit and places they want to see, everything completely mapped out – all they need is to get there.

At first, the Party thinks they should just be able to go, make a long day of it. Leave really early in the morning, pile into Mike's station wagon, and come back late at night.

But Jim Hopper has a different idea.

There's no way he's letting a bunch of 17 year olds roam around the streets of Chicago all by themselves-

(holy crap, they're 17 years old. when did that happen?)

-but he also knows that this is part of what high school seniors do as they're considering colleges, going to visit campuses.

"We could chaperone them," Joyce says as they're lying in bed one weekday night. Jim's on his back, one arm folded behind his head, while Joyce has her head pillowed on his shoulder. The slight weight

of her is comforting and exciting all at the same time.

But, what Joyce just said.... Jim breathes out a laugh. "You volunteering us to take six teenagers into Chicago for a weekend?"

Jim feels Joyce shrug against his ribs. "Figure it might be a nice thing to do for them. They're good kids, Jim. And going off to *college*. We should be supportive." Joyce turns her head against his shoulder, chin propped against him, and Jim knows she's looking at him. "Besides, we could have a night out on the town. Just you and me, maybe a nice dinner? We never really did much dating before we got married."

Jim turns his head just enough so he can look down at her. "Would you wear a fancy dress?" he asks, grinning.

Joyce smiles and there's a wicked twist to the curve of her lips that promises nothing but good things. "Of course." She smiles wider, nose wrinkling as she giggles. "Maybe you'll even get lucky."

Jim lets out a laugh. "Now we're talking." He sighs, thinking about having an evening out with the woman he loves. "You'd be ok leaving the kids in a hotel by themselves?"

Joyce lets out wry laugh. "Please. Their idea of being wild and out of control is playing that game of theirs until 3 in the morning. I think they'll be fine. Plus, they're almost adults, Jim. And they won't be supervised when they go off to college. They gotta learn to be on their own sometime."

Jim nods. "Ok, yeah, I guess we can do this. We'll talk to El and Will in the morning."

Once Jim and Joyce offer to chaperone their trip to Chicago, the Party makes the rest of their plans with lightning speed, El and Jim working together to finish coordinating plans. And, in the end, this is what they come up with:

Two weekends before Thanksgiving, the Party plus Jim and Joyce will pile into two cars, Jim's Blazer and Mike's station wagon, and make the 3 and a half hour drive to Chicago on a Friday afternoon after school. They'll have dinner and then check into their hotel, where they will have three rooms: one for El and Max, one for the boys, and Jim and Joyce (if he and Joyce are going on a date in the city, there is *no* way he's sharing a room with *anyone else*, if you catch his meaning).

They'll spend Saturday and Sunday during the day touring college campuses, with the Party hanging out at the hotel Saturday night while Jim and Joyce go out for a nice night out. They'll have money for pizza while the adults have a nice, grown-up dinner. And then, Sunday afternoon, they'll all drive back to Hawkins with enough time to get in a good night sleep for school the next day.

Finally, the day arrives and everyone meets at the Hopper-Byers' household, the trunk of Mike's car crammed with everyone's things. The Hopper-Byers' have their things in the back of Jim's cruiser and, when Mike gets there, it's time to figure out who's riding with who.

"I'm going with Mike," El says, latching on to her boyfriend, both arms wrapped around one of his.

Jim has to fight to keep from rolling his eyes. *No fucking kidding*, he thinks, having decided a long time ago that that particular battle wasn't even worth *thinking* about fighting. "Ok, so the real question is who's riding with us? Because you really don't all want to be crammed into Mike's car the whole way to Chicago."

Will raises his hand. "I'll go with you and Mom, Hop."

"Yeah, I'll go, too," Dustin says. "To keep Will company, but also to get away from the car full of lovebirds."

Lucas sticks his tongue out at Dustin. "You're just sad Megan wasn't able to go with us."

Dustin shrugs, shoulders slumping a bit at the end. "Yeah, well, she's looking at colleges in the Boston area and, well...." Dustin's sentence trails off sadly. Jim's not entirely sure what's going on, but he knows

it can't be good that Dustin and his girlfriend are thinking of schools in different states, never mind different cities.

"Well, that's settled," Jim says after clearing his throat. "C'mon, let's get this show on the road. We're losing daylight, kids."

And then they're off, Jim, Joyce, Will and Dustin in his car, the rest in Mike's, Jim leading the small caravan through the streets and onto the highway. He keeps an eye on the rearview mirror to check on Mike, to make sure the kid is following along fine.

But, other than having to stop a few times to stretch and refuel, the drive goes pretty smoothly. The first hour is kind of loud in the car, as Will and Dustin spend all that time talking about some new video game something or other. But, after a while, Dustin falls asleep and Will sketches until the light runs out, after which *he* falls asleep, leaving only the two adults awake in the front seat.

The skyline of Chicago shines bright against the twilight sky as the small caravan makes its way into the city limits, beckoning with possibility. They end up having dinner at a small diner just down the street from their hotel – some of the better fries Jim has ever had, if he's being 100% honest – before they pile into their hotel and all but *collapse* as they get to their rooms. Even though it's early, being in the car that long isn't really something most of them are used to and it's exhausting. Plus, they all want to be well rested for the following two days.

Saturday dawns overcast, clouds thin and grey under the November morning sky. After a bit of drama trying to wake up 6 teenagers at a reasonable hour for breakfast, they all make their way back to the diner from the night before for breakfast.

As Jim sits in the oversized booth, drinking his coffee, eating his eggs, he's overwhelmed with the strongest wave of bittersweet pride. He's listening to the kids talk about which parts of the various campuses they want to make sure they hit, all mapped out, and it hits him, like a breath-stealing punch: this time next year, El's going to be away at *college*.

He looks at his daughter and just feels the emotion well up inside of

him, all maudlin and overwhelming and he almost can't take it. It's like, one day he's taking in a scared, 13 year old girl from the woods and then he blinks and, suddenly, she's 17 years old, almost a woman, strong and smart, getting ready to become an adult, getting ready to spread her wings and *fly*. And he's proud, *so proud*, of how far she's come, of how hard she's worked, it almost chokes him up.

Jim feels Joyce's hand on his knee, giving it a comforting squeeze, and he turns to see her smiling up at him knowingly, her own eyes shimmering with tears of how far not just their kids, but *all* the kids have come. All 6 of them have turned into fine, young adults – smart, determined, caring. Jim feels privileged he got to watch it happen, that he had a front row seat to seeing them grow up. And he's so happy they want to be in the same city for college, that they don't want to let go of the familial bonds that they've formed from all the crazy shit they've gone through together.

Jim's especially happy because he knows El will have people to rely on if she needs to once she's away at school, including and *especially* Mike. It's a conversation for another time, but Jim's counting on Mike to take care of everyone once they're away at school. And maybe it's unfair of Jim to expect Mike to do this. But Jim also knows that Mike will take on the responsibility regardless, if he hasn't already.

Kid's a natural leader, Jim thinks, letting his gaze sliding over Mike, where the kid is taking a bite of a piece of toast El is holding up to his mouth, both of them grinning playfully at each other. And Jim knows that, just like Mike will take care of El, El will take care of Mike, like it's just the natural order of the universe. *They'll be there for each other*. Jim knows this, knows he'll be able to breathe somewhat easier with the knowledge that those two have each other's backs, that they're smart and capable, that they know they can always ask for help if they need it and that they won't hesitate to do so if they need to.

Jim's aware that he's staring at El and Mike, but he doesn't look away. Not even when El looks over at him, one eyebrow raised in question. "Dad? Everything ok?" El calls him 'Dad' more often than not, these days, and it never fails to tug at Jim's heartstrings when she does so.

“What, can’t a father watch his kid?”

“No?” El draws out, eyebrow arching even higher. “Especially not with that stupid smile on your face.”

The rest of the kids let out guffawing laughs at El’s comments – El’s practically the only teenager in all of Hawkins who dares to talk back to the Chief of Police-

“Yeah, what gives, Hop? Getting all sappy on us in your old age?” Mike says, grinning.

And there’s the only other kid who dares give me lip, Jim thinks with a smile. “Yeah, yeah, Wheeler. Admit it, you’re gonna miss me when you move away.”

Mike rolls his eyes. “Oh, please,” he says, still smiling. “I won’t have to listen to any more stories from your ‘glory days’.”

Jim barks out a laugh. “Ha! I’ll just save them up and unload all of them on you when you come home for the holidays.”

Mike scoffs. “Well, maybe I won’t come home for the holidays, then.”

El pouts. “Mike, no! You have to come home with me.”

“Yeah, Mike,” Jim says with a snicker. “Listen to your girl, there. Got a good head on her shoulders.”

The teasing continues for a while longer – Mike and Jim good-naturedly giving each other shit, El trying to moderate while getting in her own digs every once in a while, Max laughing, everyone else just watching with silent amusement – until breakfast is over and they’re moving on to their first college campus visit.

Jim spends the day keeping one eye on Mike and El during the campus tours, the two walking hand-in-hand as they look around, pointing out things of interest, trying to imagine themselves in these spaces, laughing and teasing and dreaming. And Jim knows, no matter what the future holds, they’ll be together.

And he’ll be so, so proud.

The rooms at the hotel are all in a row, Hop and Joyce's at one end, the boys' on the other. Everyone is in the boys' room, the Party sitting sprawled across two queen size mattresses while Hop and Joyce stand, dressed for a night out.

"Here's the number of the restaurant," Hop says, handing a piece of paper over to Mike. Mike looks down at the piece of hotel stationary to see the name and the number scrawled across the page. "Call me if anything goes wrong. Money for pizza is on the dresser, with some extra for the vending machines. I'm counting on you, Mike. No gallivanting across Chicago." Hop pauses to give a pointed look at El.

Mike looks over at El, sitting next to him, her thigh pressed against his as they sit on the bed, as she sniffs, crossing arms, all offended. "That was *one time*, years ago," El says with a pout that Mike just finds too adorable for her own good.

Hop grins. "Doesn't take much to get hooked on the taste for adventure, Ellie," Hop teases.

"Jim, c'mon, let's go," Joyce says. "The taxi should be here soon." Joyce moves over to Will to give him a quick kiss on the forehead. "You guys have fun tonight, ok?"

Will smiles. "You, too, Mom. Go, we'll be fine."

Hop looks back at Mike. "Remember, anything goes wrong...."

Mike rolls his eyes. "I call the restaurant, I got it."

"We'll be fine," Dustin says, chiming in. "We can take care of ourselves."

Mike stifles a laugh as Hop raises both eyebrows in uncertainty. "Uh-huh," is all the older man says after a beat before looking at Mike. "Keep an eye on him in particular, Wheeler."

Mike laughs at Dustin's offended "Hey!" but he nods. "Will do,

Chief.”

And then the adults are gone...and it's just six 17-year olds in a hotel room. Alone. In the middle of a big city.

“So, now what?” Max asks from where she and Lucas are leaning against the headboard of the bed that Lucas and Dustin are sharing. Max is half sprawled across Lucas’ lap, her head pillowed on his shoulder.

Lucas shrugs. “I dunno, what is there to do?”

For a moment, there's silence as they all look at each other. Then Dustin speaks, bursting into a flurry of motion. “I'm gonna go check out the vending machines. I'm feeling a bit peckish before dinner. Who's with me?” Dustin looks around, high hopes etched on the lines of his face, and Mike almost has to laugh at how excitedly desperate he looks.

But when no one volunteers, Dustin pouts, all overly exaggerated. “*Fine*,” he all but exclaims. “No one gets to complain when all I bring back for y'all are 3 Musketeers. *No one*.” Dustin gets up, scoops a handful of dollar bills off the dresser where the larger bills for dinner are waiting, and strides from the room.

Max snorts at the door closes behind him. “What a drama queen,” she says, chuckling at her own stupid pun.

Will rolls his eyes. “Ha, ha,” he deadpans, leaning in towards the nightstand between the two beds for the remote. “Let's see what's on TV. This hotel gets HBO, yeah? Maybe a cool movie's on or something.”

There's a certain smell to hotel hallways that is fascinating, Dustin realizes as he wanders the carpeted hallways in search of the vending machines. It's smell that's both sterile and stuffy, all cleaning supplies and suitcases and just a hint of chlorine from the pool.

Dustin hasn't been in many hotels (just one other time, a long time ago, when he and his parents went on vacation when Dustin was maybe 5 or 6), but he imagines they all smell like this.

Really, though, he's glad for the moment alone, glad to have the space to breathe for himself. Although looking at college campuses has been exciting – and Northwestern is *exactly* as he pictured it and *more* – sometimes it's hard being in the same room as the two couples...especially when his own relationship seems to have an expiration date.

Dustin's not sure if he loves Megan, but he knows he cares about her *a lot*. So when she told him she was exclusively looking at schools in Boston – where her family had gone to school since time immemorial, it seems – Dustin's more than a little heartbroken. Because he's not looking at schools in the area *at all*, the Party all centering in on Chicago as their city of choice. And, maybe it's unhealthy to be so attached to his friends, but Dustin knows he can't be separated from them, knows he would give up Megan before he gave up his friends.

It's a realization that hits like a punch to the gut when it comes to him and Dustin isn't sure what to do with the knowledge. He and Megan haven't talked about what happens after they graduate – ignorance is bliss, and everything – but he knows there's going to be a lot of hard decisions and sad conversations in the months ahead. Things he really doesn't want to think about right at this moment.

So, Dustin's roaming the halls, trying to figure out where the vending machines are. It takes a bit of searching, but eventually Dustin finds the vending machines (*he'll buy them all 3 musketeers, just they watch...*). It's a room tucked in the corner at the end of their floor, all tiled floors and hot from the exhaust fans on the vending machines.

There's a window in the room and Dustin spies a 7-11 just outside – ooh, he knows what they're doing later – before he turns to see the vending machines...and his jaw drops, a giddy smile fighting to tug at his lips.

There's not just the usual snack-and-soda vending machines. There's a machine for coffee and hot chocolate, another for frozen items, and

another for larger snack foods and small meals. There's chips and small packets of mini donuts and – is that *Cup o'Noodles*? Dustin lets out a laugh, excitement spreading in his veins. If there's a vending machine heaven, Dustin Henderson just found it.

Oh, he's *so* gonna need more money.

HBO is showing "Highlander" and that's what they settle on as they wait for Dustin to come back. None of their parents had let them see it, so they're pretty excited. There's a bit of awkwardness at the very early sex scene in the movie, but they all push past it, getting caught up in the beginnings of the story being told.

And then Dustin bursts into the room. "Guys! I found vending machine nirvana! You gotta come see th – ooh, is this 'Highlander'?"

El arches her eyebrows from where she's sitting – curled up in the space between Mike's legs, her back pressed against his front, his arms around her waist. Dustin is pretty prone to bouts of dramatization – no surprise, really – but she's tentatively curious. "Vending machine nirvana?" she repeats, questioning, prompting.

Dustin focuses back on the rest of the Party, excitement sparkling in his eyes. "Yeah, c'mon. I came back to grab my wallet – need more dollars – but you guys gotta see this."

El looks up at Mike and shrugs. "I could do with some candy."

Mike quirks an eyebrow at her, but he smiles. "Ok, let's go see this 'nirvana'," Mike says, fingers forming air quotes.

"Ugh, *fine*," Max says as she drags herself from Lucas' embrace. "But this better be fucking awesome."

It's not, El comes to discover only a few minutes later, but it's still pretty cool. There's a lot of options and they all spend way too long stuffing dollars and coins into the machine, making a variety of selections, loading up on carbs and sugar and soda – "All things a

growing boy needs,” Lucas jokes.

“Again, you stopped growing,” Max says, poking Lucas in the arm. “The only growing you’re gonna do is *out*, not up.”

“Please, this rugged physique?” Lucas says, grinning as he flexes his arms. “*Never*.”

El laughs as Max pokes Lucas again, this time in the belly. “Uh-huh. Is that...is that a *roll* I feel there?”

Lucas’ hands immediately go to his stomach, pushing his shirt up just enough so he can touch his skin and he glares at Max a half a second later, who’s laughing uproariously. “Oh, very funny, MadMax.”

“Oh man,” Max say through her laughter. “You shoulda seen the look on your face, Stalker. *Classic*.”

Eventually, they all make it back to the boys’ room, arms laden with snacks and sodas. They complete their haul by calling out for pizza, ordering 3 large pies – one cheese, one combo, and one mushroom and pepperoni.

Less than an hour later, the pizzas are mostly devoured, the chips and candy half gone. The Party is hopped up on sugar and excitement at being *in Chicago*, all six of them laughing and feeling *free* in a way they never have before.

“Highlander” is still playing on the TV, but they’re only half paying attention to it. So, when Dustin grabs the remote, none of them complain.

But he does have their attention moments later when, as he’s changing the channels, he speaks. “I hear you can get porn on these things. Wanna see if we can find it?”

There’s a bit of heavy silence that’s broken moments later by Will. “Oh, *god*, please don’t,” he groans, burying his face in his hands.

Lucas narrows his eyes, skeptic disbelief pulling down his eyebrows, and he scoffs. “Prove it.”

Dustin's grinning, *challenge accepted*. "Alright, I will."

"I'm down," Max says, laughing a bit. "Color me a bit curious."

El wrinkles her nose. Yeah, no, thank you. The only sex she's interested in is sex with Mike. *And, speaking of which....* Distracted earlier by all the pizza and candy, it's only now occurring to El that there's an empty room just next door... an empty room with an equally empty bed, just *waiting* for someone - or two *someones* - to be in it....

Her body warms with the possibilities, desire slowly building in her veins, and El fights to hold down her grin. She looks up at Mike, who's watching the rest of the Party talk back and forth, Lucas giving Dustin shit as he flips through the channels for the Pay-per-View offerings. For a moment, El just looks up at Mike, taking in the sight of his handsome face – all defined angles and soft skin and kissable lips. Her breath hitches in her chest and El knows, just *knows*, that she needs him. Right. Now.

So, she grabs his hand, catching his attention. "Hey, wanna get out of here?" she says, arching her eyebrows with what she hopes is seductive suggestion.

But Mike smiles at her, a little confused, but too calm given the way El knows she's looking at him. "Uh, yeah, sure, if you want," he says.

El fights the urge to roll her eyes and smack her palm to her forehead. But she scoots off the bed, pulling Mike to his feet. "We're going for a walk," she tells the room – Dustin and Lucas are bickering, Max is flipping through the hotel room guide trying to see if she can figure out the Pay-per-View thing, and Will is trying to moderate, ever the peacekeeper. So the rest of the Party is barely paying attention as El leads Mike out of the room.

"So, where're we going?" Mike asks as El takes out her room key from her pocket and opens the door, wordlessly dragging Mike inside.

El lets the door shut and she turns, pushing him up against the door a little rougher than strictly necessary. He gasps a bit, but his cheeks flush, a smile beginning to tug at his lips, like he's starting to see

where this is going. “Michael Wheeler, you’re an idiot,” she says before she grabs him by the front of the shirt, rising up on her toes as she pulls him down, their lips meeting in the middle.

To be fair, it takes Mike only a millisecond to fully comprehend what’s going on and he groans as he kisses her back, one hand fisting in her hair, the other slipping beneath her shirt. *You’re right, I am an idiot*, he says, voice echoing in her mind, his lips too occupied with trying to devour hers to speak out loud. The hand under her shirt slides down, cupping the back of her thigh right below the seat of her jeans, nudging her up. El grins against Mike’s lips and, with his hand supporting her thigh, she hops up, arms going around his neck as her legs wrap around his waist, her lips never leaving his. His arm wraps around under her thighs, supporting her, his touch warm through the denim of her jeans.

I’m sure you can think of a few ways to make it up to me, El says as he starts walks them back towards her bed. God, she loves being carried by him like this, loves the feeling of being weightless in his arms, the thrill of knowing how much control he has in this moment. Her lips break away from his as she pulls her shirt up and over her head, thighs squeezing around him to keep from falling. It makes him groan, deep and low, the sound sending shivers down her spine, and *god*, they’re wearing too many clothes.

Mike turns them around and sits down on the bed, El still wrapped around him. He wastes no time in immediately leaning over to press frenzied kisses to her neck and collarbone that quickly start trailing down to the tops of her breasts. His mouth is hot against her skin and it makes El squirm, heat rushing through her, making her feel languid and desirable. His hands are *everywhere* – the expanse of her stomach, the curve of her ribcage, the swell of her hip.

El’s hands dive under Mike’s t-shirt, her palms gliding across his skin as she removes the article of clothing, needing to feel his bare skin against hers. With a quick flick of her powers, the clasp of her bra is undone and Mike’s hands come up under the open ends to help pull it off her shoulders, hands hot against her curves. El moans and arches against him, needing to be closer, always closer.

It doesn’t take much longer to remove the rest of their clothes and

slip under the covers, all eager excitement and breathless passion. Then they're skin to skin, bodies pressed together in ways that are both familiar and endlessly thrilling, the rest of the world fading to the background as they lose themselves in each other over and over again, surrounded by stiff, bleached hotel sheets and slightly recycled air.

But, even in this hotel room, miles from home, in the city that they hope holds their future, all that matters is that they're together, that they love each other.

Just the way it's always been.

It only takes the Party a few minutes to realize that Mike and El have snuck out to go have sex next door and they turn up the volume of the television to drown out the noise they know will be coming from the other side of the wall. "God, they are unbelievable," Max says with a roll of her eyes.

"Lucky bastard," Lucas grumbles under his breath, even though he's just as exasperated (though he's mostly angry *he* didn't think sneaking off for the other room first), and Max nudges him *hard* with her elbow.

Eventually, Dustin gives up the search for Pay-per-View porn and he proposes a trip down the street to the 7-11. They don't have 7-11s in Hawkins, but Dustin has seen them on TV and in movies and he's always wanted to try a Slurpee. So, ignoring the sounds coming from next door – bed creaking, the occasional moan or giggle, *god, why are hotel room walls never thick enough?* – the four remaining Party members venture forth, laughing and teasing as they go to 7-11 and use their remaining money to buy two Slurpees each, captivated by all the flavors.

Once they're back in the hotel, they stop in front of the door to the boys' room and Dustin pauses. "Did we want to share with the two lovebirds?" For the moment, there's no sound coming from the other

room, but who knows *what's* going on in there.

Max snorts. “Yeah, no, I’m not going in there. By the way, you guys won’t mind if I sleep in your room tonight, yeah?”

Will takes his key out of his pocket, both his Slurpees held close to his body with his other arm, and he sniffs airily. “Well, I’m not going in there. There are things I can’t unsee that I have no wish to see again, thank you very much,” he says as he unlocks the door and entering the room.

Dustin shrugs and follows the rest of them into the room. “Well, their loss.”

Max eventually goes back into her room, finding Mike and El still in bed, but mostly dressed – her in her PJs, him in his t-shirt and boxers – as they snuggle with the covers half thrown over them. “God, even when you guys *get* a room, you’re still fucking obnoxious.” The remark earns her two middle fingers flashed in her direction and she grins, chuckling as she grabs her own PJs and goes into the bathroom to change.

The next day, after touring a couple more colleges and exploring downtown Chicago, everyone piles into the two cars to head home back to Hawkins, the Party all full of dreams for the future, hopeful and excited and *eager* (even though there’s a small part of them that’s scared; the world’s a big place, full of unknowns. But, as long as they have each other, they’ll be fine, they know it). They all hope they’ll be back someday, all wishing *so hard* that they can manage to stay together, that they’ll get to explore the big city as adults.

Hop and Joyce know, though. The Party will come back someday, *all* of them. And they’ll be better than fine. They’ll be *fantastic*.

(a year later, the party will all be living in chicago – mike, dustin, and lucas at northwestern, el and max at the university of chicago, will at the art institute, all of them practically living out of each other’s spaces – the

northwestern dorm rooms and the apartment el, max, and will share – all but inseparable.)

Notes for the Chapter:

So, by now, I'm sure some of you have noticed that the chapter count no longer ends with "/?". That's because, as sad as this is, I'm nearing the end of this fic. I've got 4 definite chapters left to write. It could get stretched out *a bit*, but not by much - a chapter or two at the most.

So, as we head into the home stretch, I wanted to take a moment to thank everyone for coming along with me on this crazy journey. Your support has made this all not just possible, but *enjoyable*. So, thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for everything.

28. Apr - May 1989

Notes for the Chapter:

So, yeah...this chapter is...

Something else

Like, I almost melted writing this. Get ready for fluff and sensuality, y'all.

And welcome to the Mike Wheeler Schmoopy Romance Hour...

Apr - May 1989

It's a beautiful day in the middle of April – the sun is shining, the birds are singing, flowers are blooming everywhere – a perfect day to sit outside and have lunch.

The seniors of Hawkins High have descended en masse on every available outdoor seat, relegating the majority of the lowerclassmen to the stuffy cafeteria. And, it's Pizza day, which, as every student knows, is the *best* day.

And making the day even better? The reveal of Prom theme – “An Enchanted Evening” – and the announcement of ticket sales. Now everyone's talking about who's going with who and what they're going to wear and where the best after parties are going to be.

And some are talking about matters a little more *meta*....

““An Enchanted Evening”? Whose idea was that? What does that even *mean*?”

Megan giggles at Dustin's incredulity. She's sitting with Mike and Dustin, waiting for the others to get their food, the three of them

having come from the same History class moments ago. "It's supposed to be *romantic*, Dustin," she says, nudging him with her shoulder. God, boys are so oblivious sometimes....

Dustin gives her a look. "Oh, I get that," he says, lips twisting in a wry grin. "But, like, what's the aesthetic? How does one decorate a gymnasium to be 'an enchanted evening'?"

Mike shrugs. "Sounds like fairy tales and, like, Cinderella-type stuff. El will love it, I'm sure."

Megan smiles. "Are you going to formally ask her? I mean, I know it's a foregone conclusion that you're going together, but you know what I mean."

Dustin lays a hand on her thigh and squeezes. "Should I do a thing where I ask you?" There's concern in his eyes, wanting to make sure he does this right, wanting to do whatever it takes to make her happy. But all she needs is him, something Megan hasn't gotten Dustin to understand quite yet.

Still, Megan lets out a happy sigh and leans over to press a soft kiss to Dustin's lips. For a moment, she lets herself fall into the sensation of kissing him, feels the familiar, heady rush pump through her veins (*it's been almost a year and half and the simple touch of his lips to hers still makes her shiver*).

Dustin kisses her back and, before she knows it, Megan's opening her mouth against his, lips slanting just a bit harder, chasing the warm beginnings of *something*, and-

"Geeze, now I get why you guys complain about me and El all the time. *Gross*, you two."

Megan pulls away from Dustin at the sound of Mike's voice and laughs at the combination of the blush that spreads across Dustin's face and the way he's glaring at Mike, all exasperated and incredulous. "Anyway," Megan says through her laughter. "Mike, asking El to Prom?"

"Still haven't answered *my* question, Megs," Dustin grumbles.

Mike chuckles and he smiles even wider as he leans in conspiratorially. “Yeah, I have this whole thing planned. It’ll start at her locker after school and-”

“Hey guys,” El says as she appears what feels like out of nowhere, sitting down next to Mike with a soda in one hand and a plate of pizza slices in the other. She looks over, smiling, at Mike, who’s looking back at her with a deer-in-the-headlights look that almost makes Megan laugh out loud again. “Hi,” El says, her voice going soft, intimate.

The look on Mike’s face morphs into one that’s just as soft as El’s voice – lips curving in a gentle smile, a wondrous look in eyes, like there’s a part of him that can’t believe that she’s real and with him, like he’ll never, *ever*, get over just how much he loves her. “Hi,” he says back, just as intimate and, right in front of Megan and Dustin, Mike and El enter their own little world where it’s just the two of them. El moves first, Mike following suit, and then they’re kissing – slow, soft, *deep* lingering kisses, full of quiet, heart-pounding passion.

Dustin lets out a snort and kicks out with his foot, hitting Mike in the shin. “C’mon, you guys. No getting caught having sex at school again, ok?”

Mike pulls away from El with a frustrated glare. “We’re just kissing.”

Dustin laughs. “That’s how it always starts, Michael,” he says with a grin. “But, before you know it, someone’s walking in on you knocking boots in the Bio lab.”

El lets out a small whine of indignation. “We weren’t wearing boots,” she says, crossing her arms over her chest.

Mike chokes a bit. “It’s just a saying, El,” he says, smiling a bit even though he’s blushing.

El frowns. “I know,” she says and it’s clear she has more she wants to say, but she just shakes her head. “*Anyway*, Mike,” she says, focusing on him again. “Remind me to let your mom know what color my prom dress is so she can get you a matching tie.”

Mike's jaw drops, all disbelief, and he splutters. "But I haven't even asked you yet!"

El looks at Mike, eyebrow arched, grin pulling up at her lips. "You say that like there was any doubt we'd be going together."

To Megan's amusement, Mike *pouts*. "But I was gonna ask. I had a plan and everything."

El makes a noise, cooing a soothing hum as she leans over and presses a sweet kiss against Mike's pouting lips. "Aww, it's ok, sweetheart," she says, teasingly – El and Mike aren't big on pet names unless they're teasing or making fun of each other. "You save your plan for another time."

"There's no more school dances after this," Mike grumbles as El pulls away to take a bite of her pizza.

"Hmm," El says with an enigmatic smile. "I'm sure you'll figure out a way to use it later."

Mike rolls his eyes. "Yeah, yeah...." He trails off, brow furrowing. "Hey, why don't you just tell me what color your dress is? I can just tell my mom for you."

El looks over at Megan with a knowing look – *boys* – before she looks back at Mike with an arched eyebrow. "You'll forget to tell her, if I tell you now."

Mike scoffs. "No, I won't. Besides, now I'm curious and want to know what color you're going to be wearing."

El looks skeptical, even as she smirks. "Uh-huh, well, that curiosity is going to make you remember to remind me. I know you, Michael Wheeler. You *hate* mysteries and you won't be able to stop thinking about it until I tell you. Therefore, you'll remember to remind me." El's smirk turns into a sweet smile.

Megan laughs. "Oh, good one, El."

El looks over at her. "It really is, isn't it?"

Mike pouts again. “Fine, see if I even take you to Prom, now.” El lets out a snorting laugh before she leans over to whisper something into Mike’s ear, something that makes Mike blush and shiver. Dustin gags as Mike smiles. “Never mind,” Mike says in almost a breathless rush. “I’m taking you to Prom.”

“That’s what I thought,” El says, glowing with triumph.

Soon, the rest of the Party shows up and Megan lets herself fade to the background – it’s hard not to, especially when there’s a wealth of shared experiences between the rest of them that Megan doesn’t, *can’t*, share.

Always being a little outside-looking-in is something that Megan has gotten used to since she started dating Dustin. There’s a lot they’re not telling her, a lot of secrets she’s still in the dark on, secrets that the rest of them have to talk around when Megan’s there. Megan won’t say that it doesn’t hurt a little, even after all this time, but she understands. Maybe she will, someday.

(this is to say nothing about how, in four short months, megan will be in boston at boston university and the whole party will be in chicago. she and dustin haven’t talked yet about how they want to handle the distance, but megan can’t help but feel sometimes that her relationship with dustin has an expiration date and it hurts more than words can say. she’s gotten real good at ignoring the dread that lingers in the corners of her mind, wanting only to live in the moment, happy and in love.)

The darkness of the Void is quiet and calm all around her. What once scared El is now soothing, as the darkness around her has come to symbolize *Mike*, of being with him with no one to interrupt, no one else around.

They’re in bed in his room – their time in the Void is spent wherever Mike physically is, since they haven’t figured out how to let him come to her in the Void, if it’s even possible. The covers are pulled up to their chests, arms above the blankets, as they lay, luxuriating in

the afterglow of their lovemaking.

Even though El knows it's not real, that she's really in her bed and not his, her body sings with satisfaction nonetheless, that particular itch scratched until they can be together for real.

She'd barely gotten any time alone with Mike today, the both of them busy with various school things. They hadn't even been able to have lunch together, much less spend any time alone after school – El had needed to go talk to Ms. Gorsinski about questions she had on her math homework, and Mike had a swim meet the next town over right after school.

By the time they see each other in the Void, they'd maybe seen each other for a grand total of 20 minutes that day. *Not enough. Never enough.*

So, when El finally sees Mike in the Void that evening, like she does every night they're not together, they don't even say *hello* before his mouth is on hers, the both of them losing themselves in each other, all unrestrained passion and overwhelming love.

And now they lay together in the Void, bodies pressed together, warm and skin-to-skin. El's lying on her back, Mike lying on his side next to her. He has one arm thrown across her over the covers, hand on her blanket-covered stomach, while one leg is hooked over hers, his foot and calf wedged between her lower legs.

One of El's hands rests on his forearm while the other caresses his hand, fingers running over the top of his palm, down the length of his fingers. God, she loves his hands – all large, warm palms and long, nimble fingers. She loses so much time watching his hands, fascinated by the way they flex and bend, marveling at the delicate dexterity of his fingers. She loves watching him fiddle with electronics or hold a pencil or grip the steering wheel. And she *especially* loves the way those hands make her feel and El can't help the way her face flushes as she think of exactly *how* those hands and fingers touch her, the things they do to her.

Mike lets out a particularly vocal sigh and El shifts her head, hair bunching beneath her, to look at him. "What was that noise for?" she

asks with a small smile, her voice soft and a little sleepy.

Mike smiles and leans in to nuzzle her cheek with his nose before he presses a soft kiss to the corner of her mouth. "Just...missed you today, is all," he says, his own voice low. "I can't help it, I'm addicted to you and I hate it when I barely see you."

El's stomach does a happy, swooping flip and she giggles. "I know the feeling," she says, words trailing off in a sigh. "But, at least we can see each other in the Void like this, no matter how busy we are."

"Mmm, count me lucky you have superpowers," Mike says with a low laugh. A second later, he's shaking his head, amused. "Do you ever think about how we've been *technically* sleeping together since before high school? And I do mean actual sleeping, by the way – though I'm not complaining about having sex with you in the Void, like, *at all*."

El breathes out a laugh. "Well, I like falling asleep with you." She grins, barely holding in the rest of her laughter. "And I guess the sex isn't bad, either."

Mike lets out a snort, smirking down at her. "That so, huh? Never would have guessed, given the way you were clawing at my back not 5 minutes ago." He quirks an eyebrow at her, smirk growing into a shit-eating grin. "Or was that a different girl who was moaning loudly in my ear, begging me not to stop?"

El reaches up and flicks Mike's forehead. "Don't be crude," she says primly, even though she's smiling.

Mike laughs. "Not crude if it's the truth," he says, sliding his hand across her stomach so he can punctuate his point with a squeeze of her hip. "Oh, my mom gave me a tie and vest for my suit for Prom," he says, suddenly changing the topic. This is how their nightly conversations usually go, like hummingbirds, flitting from topic to topic with little logical thought.

El smiles at the way his words trail off, knowing he has something he wants to say. "Yeah?"

Mike grins. "So, burgundy is your color, huh?"

El giggles. She's been keeping him in suspense about her prom dress since the day the theme was announced and it's been driving him *crazy* ever since. "Yep," she says, thinking about her dress, about how excited she is to wear it.

Mike gives El's hip another squeeze. "So, what's it look like?"

El arches an eyebrow. "It's a surprise, Mike," she teases. "Besides, it's bad luck to see it before the day of."

"That's wedding dresses," Mike says with a roll of his eyes that has El laughing. "But, fine, kill me with the suspense."

El snorts. "Stop being overdramatic," she says, leaning up to press a ghost of a kiss to the line of his jaw. "You know you'll like it, no matter what."

"This is true," Mike says with a nod. "You could be wearing a sack and I'd still think you were the most beautiful woman in the world."

Part of El wants to respond with a quippy one-liner, but she's too busy picturing Mike's face when he sees her in the dress she's picked out – floor-length, burgundy velvet, ruched bodice with a straight neckline, fabric hugging her curves until her hips, falling to the floor like a waterfall, the back dipping low and curving under the small of her back with only two thin ties stretching across to keep the dress hugged close to her, the whole thing held up by spaghetti-thin straps.

Yeah, she's going to knock his socks off.

So, El just reaches up and kisses him again, this time on the lips. "You're sweet," she says. "I love you."

"Love you, too," Mike says. "And it's the truth, by the way."

El smiles, melting a little, before she remembers something else she wanted to mention to him. "Oh, Will and I were talking earlier, about going into Chicago to check out apartments." As it turns out, it's cheaper for Will and El to share an apartment than to pay to live in the dorms – especially since Max is on board, too, and their schools aren't that far away from each other. So, after a quick call to the University's housing office to ask about good places to find an

apartment, El's narrowed down the list to a handful of buildings with 3 bedroom apartments for rent. "Did you want to come with us to check them out? Hop offered to drive us. Or, if you wanted, we could go with just the three of us, you, me, and Will."

Mike grins. "Or, we could go with just the *two* of us, stay the night somewhere" – he leans over to nip at her earlobe – "no one to bother us" – a kiss just below her ear, where her jaw meets her neck – "be as loud as we want..."

Despite the way her heart begins racing in her chest, El snorts and pokes Mike in the ribcage. "With what money, you dork?"

Mike pulls away, looking affronted. "I have money," he says, pouting. But he sighs, breath blowing out from his lips. "Fine, ruin all my fun." He's quiet for a moment before he gets serious again. "But, yeah, if you guys want to go, just let me know and I'll go with. Sounds like fun."

El grins. "Ok, good. Will and I will work out the details." She leans up to press a quick kiss to Mike's lips. "Someday, we'll be looking at places for just you and me," she says, feeling giddy at the thought of a whole future with her and Mike.

Mike removes his hand from her hip and tucks her hair behind her ear, fingers sliding into her curls to cup the side of her head. He's smiling, all soft and love-sick, looking just as giddy as she feels. "I can't wait," he says, softly.

El's heart is still racing from earlier and she leans into the feeling, rolling over so she's facing him completely. She reaches out and presses a hand to Mike's chest, feeling the warmth of his skin beneath her palm, the beat of his heart under her touch. "A place for just you and me," she says, still dreaming, still looking forward. "Where we can be together."

"Wherever you want," Mike says. "As long as I'm with you, I don't care." His voice rapidly pitching lower, more intimate, *husky*.

"We'll figure it out," El says, almost breathless. "In the meantime, though..." She arches an eyebrow, all flirty and suggestive. "We're

together right now. Alone.”

Mike chuckles. “Well, what do you know, so we are,” he says, mouth inches from hers. “What do you suppose we do about that?”

El hums, pretending to consider – hard to do when she’s feeling short of breath, but she manages. “Oh, I have a few ideas,” she says, hand sliding up his chest, to the back of his neck, fingernails scraping lightly against his skin, making him shiver. She tilts her head up, close enough to feel his breath on her face, mouth barely an inch from his.

“Oh yeah? Maybe you should share those ideas with me,” Mike says, now so close that his lips move against hers as he speaks.

El feels like she could just float away, she’s so happy. “Maybe I should,” she says, smiling, just before she kisses him, his mouth hot against hers, his hand curled tightly in her hair, her whole body alighting with butterflies and fireworks.

But, she has ideas she needs to share.

And, so, she does.

Senior Prom is the weekend before Memorial Day, half way through May, and *everyone* is excited. Hell, Karen’s excited and she’s just been watching the plans come together from the sidelines. The most she’s done is get a bow tie and vest to match El’s dress, a beautiful, floor length gown that Karen knows will be just *stunning* on her.

There are plans for after Prom, Karen knows, something about an after party and staying the night somewhere. In the past, Karen might have been concerned about her son spending the night somewhere after a school dance. But, Mike’s 18 now – an adult in the eyes of the law – so, legally, she can’t stop him. Which Karen doesn’t want to. Because she knows Mike’s going to be with El the whole night and she trusts him, trusts him to be safe and smart, trusts the *both* of them

to look after each other.

It's 5:15 and Mike is still in the upstairs bathroom, getting ready. Karen frowns at the clock in the kitchen, where she's getting dinner ready for the rest of the Wheeler family (which, tonight is just her and Holly, Ted off on another business trip – she spends more time away from her husband than with him these days). *He needs to be out of here in 20 minutes.* The dance starts at 7:30 and there are plans to go get dinner beforehand. And Mike *promised* Karen she could snap a few – *or a hundred* – pictures of him before he leaves for the night.

Confused and a little concerned, Karen puts down the knife that she's using to chop potatoes and heads upstairs after wiping her hands on a kitchen towel. The bathroom door is open, light spilling out onto the hallway, and Karen goes to stand in the open door.

Mike's standing in front of the bathroom mirror, completely dressed except for his tie, hair tamed to the best of his ability, hands working at the aforementioned bow tie. For a moment, Karen just looks at her son, all grown up. Over the past couple of years, he's finally grown into his height – still lean, but no longer lanky, all broad shoulders and long lines. The suit is new – his old one had been too slim in the shoulders, and the burgundy vest looks good from where it peeks out beneath his jacket.

The sight brings tears to Karen's eyes, as she realizes that her son is a *man* now, no longer her little boy. His future stretches out bright in front of him – college at Northwestern, El at his side, the two of them *together* in a way Karen just envies, but is so happy Mike has.

But, first, he needs to get that tie tied.

Karen sighs, smiling. "Looks like you could use some help."

Mike barely looks away, spying her out of the corner of his eye, but he grins wryly. "I can't seem to get the hang of this," he says with a hopeless sigh.

Karen laughs. "C'mere," she says, gesturing with her hand.

Mike turns and walks the few steps towards her, hands falling to his

side. Karen takes over, undoes the mess Mike's made of the satin fabric before starting anew, hands moving in sure motions. It's been a while since she's helped tie a man's bow tie, but her fingers remember the steps. Karen has a mental image of her doing this for Mike on his wedding day and she draws in a shaky breath, swallowing down the lump of tears that have swelled up in her throat. "You looking forward to tonight?" she asks, hoping that her voice sounds steady.

Mike's head is tipped up so Karen can work, but he glances down at her anyway, only his eyes moving. "Yeah, should be fun," he says, smiling. "El's been looking forward to it."

Karen smiles in return. "She has been," she says. "Every girl loves getting dressed up in a beautiful dress and dancing the night away with her boyfriend." Karen puts the finishing touches on the knot and steps back. "There. You have everything?"

Mike nods. "Corsage is in the fridge, overnight bag is in the trunk."

"Designated driver?" Karen's no fool; she remembers her own Prom night and all the alcohol that flowed freely.

Mike grins. "Me. No drinking for me tonight."

Karen smiles, proud. "Good. Now, come on. You promised me pictures before you go. And make sure Jim or Joyce gets pictures of you and El. Let them know I will pay for copies."

Mike rolls his eyes, suddenly all insufferable teenager. "Fine, I will. Let's hurry this up, though."

Karen laughs at Mike's just sheer impatience for taking pictures and maybe, just *maybe*, she takes one or two (or five) too many pictures, tickled pink at his growing exasperation. Finally, though, she lets him go and Mike smiles – *finally free*. He's gone with a quick kiss on her cheek, a rushed goodbye, and Karen watches him go, feeling both proud and redundant at the same time. *They grow up so fast.*

She still has one child to raise to adulthood, however – one more child still left to grow up before Karen's nest is truly empty. And

Holly still needs to eat.

Time to get back to making dinner.

It feels like it takes special skill to be both nervous and excited at the same time – like a double dose of shaking hands and pounding heartbeat – but Mike’s somehow found a way to manage it.

He curls both hands around the steering wheel mostly as way to keep from running his fingers through his hair, which he managed to wrestle into submission. Still, his fingers itch to run through his hair and Mike grips the wheel all the tighter.

Mike makes the drive over to El’s house practically on autopilot and he takes the moment to just *breathe*. He’s been running around all day, getting things ready for after prom (Mike Wheeler’s plans to ask El to Prom with a romantic gesture may have been doomed to failure, but he’s got other plans up his sleeve for how to romance the shit out of this night).

But his preparations had taken him longer than anticipated and he’d ended up having to rush home to get ready, speeding the process up faster than he’d been entirely comfortable yet.

And, for the whole of the day, he’s barely even talked to El, much less had a chance to see her.

Mike hadn’t been lying when he told El he was addicted to her. Not being near her is an ache without relief, like he’s missing a limb or some other vital part of himself. He just *needs* to be with her, needs to be where he can hold her hand or pull her into his arms or kiss her or love her.

So, yeah, that’s where all his emotions are coming from – excited to see El after being away from her all day, nervous about the surprise he has waiting for her after Prom.

Are you ok over there? I can feel your anxiety from here.

Mike smiles at the feel of El's mental voice in his head and the twisting of his gut from his nerves relaxes a bit. *Sorry. Just excited to see you.*

El snorts and it makes Mike laugh, even while he's miles away. *You just wanna see my dress.*

There is that, Mike says, smile turning into a grin. *I bet you look hot.*

The words are teasing, but there's a pointed silence from El's end that has Mike squirming. *You're not ready for this dress, Mr. Wheeler.*

Tease, Mike says. *So cruel, taunting me like this.*

Well, then, hurry up and get here. El's mental voice is breathy and seductive, even through her excitement, and it's enough to send the first frisson of *desire* skittering down his spine.

*You **are** trying to kill me, you know that, right? I'm gonna crash the car and **die** because my girlfriend, the love of my life, is a big damned tease.*

El giggles. *It's not teasing if I follow through....*

Mike draws in a sharp breath through his nose and gulps as he pulls off onto the street that leads down to El's house. "Notice she left out the part where I die," he mutters to himself.

A couple of minutes later and Mike's pulling up the driveway, gravel crunching under his tires. With corsage in hand, tucked safely in its plastic box, Mike gets out of the car. *I'm here, by the way, so you can prepare your grand entrance,* he says as he walks up the porch stairs.

Still putting on the finishing touches upstairs, so don't worry about it.

Mike rolls his eyes, glad El can't see him, and approaches the door, not even bothering to knock before opening the door. He doesn't say anything as he walks inside, but keeps an eye out for whoever is downstairs.

Will's in the living room, hands on his thighs, fingers tapping impatiently, and he smiles as he spots Mike. "Mike, hi!" Will gets up. "Mom, Hop, Mike's here!"

“Kid, you don’t have to yell,” Hop says, voice coming from the family room just out of Mike’s view. A few moments later and the entire Hopper-Byers’ family (minus El) is standing with Mike in the foyer.

“Oh, don’t you clean up well, Mike,” Joyce says, smiling fondly.

Mike can’t help but smile back. “Thanks, Joyce.”

“Yeah, not bad, kid,” Hop says. “Looks like you learned to tie a tie.”

Mike blushes and looks down. “Um, actually, my mom tied it for me.”

Hop barks out a laugh, but it’s not mean. “One of these days, you and I gotta work on that.”

Joyce gives Hop a look and tuts. “Jim, let’s get a picture of the boys before El gets downstairs.”

So, Mike and Will go to stand by the front door so they can have their picture taken. As they wait for Hop to grab the camera, Mike turns to Will with a small smile. “You ok getting a ride home from Dustin later?”

Will shrugs, grinning a bit. “Yeah, I’ll be fine. Worse comes to worst, I’ll call Hop.” Will’s grin turns mischievous. “You need me to give you the speech about treating my sister right?”

Mike snorts, but he understands the sentiment behind it, even if it’s unnecessary. “Please, she’s the one you need to be giving that speech to.”

Will chokes on a laugh. “You’re right.” There’s a pause, Will’s grin widening. “You’re gonna die, by the way.”

Mike arches an eyebrow, thrown by the words said with quite that level of cheeriness. “What?”

“El’s dress.” Will quirks his eyebrows. “It’s gonna kill you.”

Hop returns with the camera before Mike can ask any more questions and the two boys pose as Hop snaps a handful of photos. All the

while, the anticipation and excitement build in Mike's veins. He can *feel* El just upstairs and every fiber of his being itches to be near her. And he can't deny that he's *dying* to see this dress. He knows she's beautiful no matter what, but he loves seeing her get all dressed up, loves the awe that overtakes him every time.

So, when movement at the top of the staircase catches his eye and Mike shifts his gaze to look, all he can think is *Finally*.

But then El steps into view and Mike's heart just *stops*.

Oh wow.

Mike knows he's standing there looking like an idiot – gob smacked and jaw dropped – but he doesn't care (a couple of years ago, he would have at least been embarrassed, but those days are long gone). Because El is a *vision*, all soft skin and burgundy, form-hugging velvet, floor-length dress held up with the thinnest of straps (*so easy, just to slip off her shoulders, let gravity do the rest*). A delicate constellation of rhinestones embroidered in the dress catches the light, highlighting the split in the skirt, like stars across a night sky.

Half of El's hair is bound up in soft braids, pinned behind her head, while the rest is left to spill down her shoulders, all gleaming, honeyed curls. A simple pair of diamond-esque studs sparkles on her earlobes, but El otherwise wears no other jewelry. *Doesn't need it. Shines bright enough without it*, the sole thinking portion left in Mike's brain whispers.

And then she sees him and the brightest smile crosses her face, painted lips curving just so, and Mike's a goner.

Mike's seen El in all forms of dress and undress, from bundled up against the harsh Indiana winters, to wearing nothing at all as they lay in bed, and everything in between. But dressed like this, all radiant and with great care, attention paid to every detail, might be Mike's favorite. Because when El dresses like this, it makes her feel beautiful and she just *shines*, lit within by her own confidence, glowing for all the world to see, drawing the gaze of everyone around her.

And, of all the people in the world, she chooses to be with *him*. There are no words for how *honored* Mike feels each and every day he has her in his life.

It's like El is floating as she makes her way over to him and Mike has to remember how to breathe as she steps into his orbit. He's distantly aware of the sound of someone taking pictures, but almost all of his attention is focused on the woman in front of him.

El looks up at him, height difference lessened by the heels she's wearing, and smiles even wider, but almost shy, blushing prettily beneath the soft makeup she's wearing. "Hi," she says, soft and giddy.

Mike smiles on reflex. "Hi," he says back, breathing the word. "Wow, you just...*wow*."

At this, El looks down just a bit, biting gently at her lower lip. "Yeah?" There's just the barest crack in her confidence, the remnants of the lost little girl he found in the woods all those years ago coming to the surface.

Breathing in deeply, Mike leans over and presses a soft kiss to her cheek. "Pretty," he says, hand coming up to cup her cheek. "Really pretty." The callback hits him in the heart like a physical blow and Mike swallows roughly, feeling so grateful, it hurts.

El is equally affected, if the sheen in her eyes is any indication, but she smiles, glancing down. "Is that for me?"

Mike looks down to the corsage box in his hand, having almost completely forgotten about it. "Oh, uh, yeah." Mike grins, looking back up at El. "Sorry, got a little distracted." Mike opens the box and pulls the corsage out. He turns to Will, handing over the box with a quirk of his eyebrow, Will taking it wordlessly, before Mike reaches for El's hand, helping slip the elastic band around her wrist.

El marvels at the flower, bringing it up to breathe in the scent. "Gardenia," she sighs. "It's beautiful."

Mike opens his mouth to speak – something along the lines of *not as beautiful as you* or some other mushy sentiment – but Joyce's voice

cuts him off before he can. “Come on, we should get pictures with you and Mike, El. And then with all three of you.”

Spell temporarily broken, El looks over at Joyce and grins. “Ok, let me just grab my shawl from the kitchen.” Flashing Mike a look, El turns to head for the kitchen – and the sheer, matching burgundy shawl hanging from a chair – and for the second time in less than 5 minutes, Mike Wheeler loses the ability to breathe.

Almost the entirety of El’s back, from the base of her neck to the small of her back, is exposed. Only the two thin strings, tied across her back, knotted ends dangling temptingly, prevent the whole of her back from being completely naked. Mike sucks in a sharp breath, eyes closing for the briefest of moments in a bid for strength, and he knows he’s going to spend the entire night plucking at those delicate knots, waiting for the moment when he can undo them. If the front of El’s dress is a vision, the back is a *promise* – *hands trailing over her shoulder blades, mouth pressed against the back of her neck, the top of her spine, fingers pulling at the ends of each string, one knot at a time...* - a promise Mike intends to collect on.

A sharp elbow to the ribs jolts Mike from his thoughts – *later* – and he looks over at Will. “You’re drooling a little.”

Mike tries to surreptitiously wipe at his mouth, but knows he’s failing spectacularly. “Sorry.”

Will snorts. “No, you’re not.”

Mike’s only response is to shrug – any words otherwise would be a lie. And then El’s coming back towards them, shawl tucked in the crooks of her elbows, loosely wrapped around the small of her back.

There are pictures – lots of pictures – *so many* pictures – enough to make Mike fear that he’s going to have a permanent spot in his vision. But, finally, *eventually*, the three of them are out the door, Mike with his arm around El, feeling the lithe warmth of her tucked against him as he guides her to the car.

The night goes by in a blur – everyone dressed to the nines, Max and Megan looking just as elegant as El in their eveningwear, the guys all

wearing their best or new suits; dinner at Giovanni's, everyone laughing as they eat pasta and tiramisu; and, finally, Prom itself.

The gym's decorated with glitter and fairy lights, bright streamers and cloth covered tables. *An Enchanted Evening.*

They all get their picture taken at the photo booth and then it's a night of fun, acting like fools and teenagers, having the time of their lives. There's finger foods and punch, the Twist and romantic slow dances, all smiles and magic.

Eventually, the dance starts to die down, the excitement in the air shifting as the focus turns from Prom to the Prom after parties. There's debates about which one to go to, which one will give them the best time. Mike doesn't care about the after parties, though.

He has other plans.

The Party is all heading out to their cars when Mike slows up, lingering at the back of the pack, his hand holding El's keeping her with him.

El turns, beautiful confusion writ across her face, and looks up at him. "Mike?"

Always worried about him, always checking to see if he's ok. Always loving him.

Mike smiles softly and squeezes her hand. "I thought we could go somewhere else," he says, voice low. "Somewhere just the two of us."

The confusion fades to wide-eyed excitement and El's lips stretch in an enchanting, toothy grin. "You have a plan."

Mike reaches out with his free hand and taps her on the nose, feeling playful. "I have a surprise," he says, smile turning into a grin. "Do you trust me?"

El gasps, just a bit, anticipation getting the better of her. "Yes," she says. "Always."

Mike's so excited, he feels like he could just explode. "Good. C'mon,

let's go.”

They slip away without even saying goodbye – the rest of the Party is too far ahead of them, anyway – and when they get into the car, Mike reaches into the center console for the folded piece of fabric he'd stashed there earlier. He looks over at El, who's pressed against his side, practically vibrating with excitement. “You still trust me?” he asks, letting the fabric unfold – a blindfold.

El's lips quirk, smile turning devious, but she nods. “Still always.”

Mike breathes out a chuckle. “No using your powers to cheat,” he says as he drapes the fabric across her eyes, reaching behind her to tie it in a secure knot.

El sighs, the sound overdramatic. “*Fine*,” she says, teasing, the put-upon tone ruined by the way she's smiling and biting her lip.

Mike takes a moment to just look at her, beauty half obscured by the dark fabric over her eyes, her cheeks flushed, lips full beneath the bite of her teeth....

With a suddenness he didn't know he was capable of, Mike rushes forward and captures El's lips in a fierce kiss, feeling her gasp with surprise against his mouth, lips parting beneath his. She whimpers when he takes her lower lip between *his* teeth and Mike only kisses her harder. All the pent-up passion he's been suppressing all evening, stoked every time she pressed up against his side or his hand brushed against her bare back or she gave him that look (*forever, you and me, together*) – he channels it into this kiss, into his mouth slanting over hers, drinking from her lips in a way that makes them both dizzy. His blood begins to boil in his veins, all heat and desire and *El*....

Mike pulls away with a sharp gasp, mouth immediately missing the feel of pressure of her lips, and he groans a bit. “Been wanting to kiss you like that all evening,” he says, voice low, grinning as she shivers a bit.

El hums, the sound a bit shaky and, still blindfolded, she reaches out to cup his cheek. “You better get us to wherever you have this surprise planned for,” El says, urgency pitching her voice breathy and

low.

Mike's breath hitches a bit as he reaches to start the ignition. "As my lady wishes," he says.

It's a bit of a drive to their destination and Mike spends the entire time luxuriating in the warmth of El pressed against his side. She's resting her head, blindfold still secure, on his shoulder, while her hand sits on his thigh, fingers drawing meaningless, abstract patterns across the fabric of his dress slacks. Every once in a while, she touches him with just the right amount of pressure to make him shiver, but it's mostly just soothing.

They're silent the entire ride over, content with just each other's company, and Mike's heart feels full, *too* full. Just being with her – no words, in the car while he drives – is more than perfect – more than he can say, really.

Mike navigates down the familiar roads, cringing a bit as the trip takes a bit of a bumpy turn – hoping, *praying*, El doesn't figure out where they're going. But, if she has, she isn't saying anything, isn't reacting at all, so Mike thinks he's in the clear for the moment.

Not much longer later, he pulls up to their final stop and kills the engine, throwing the emergency break. He reaches out and give El's hand a squeeze. "Wait here a bit," he says, voice croaking a little, a combination of disuse and excitement. He presses a quick kiss to her lips. "No peeking. Even with your powers."

El pouts a bit before grinning. "Ok, ok. I'll *wait*."

Mike arches an eyebrow, gauging the truthfulness of her response, before he climbs out of the car. There's a quick detour to grab his duffle bag from the back before he heads inside.

Everything looks good, Mike thinks, doing a quick visual check. It's all as he left it earlier and Mike breathes a sigh of relief as he goes to do

his last minute preparations – turning on a couple of lights here, lighting a few candles there, making sure everything else is in its place.

What's taking so long? El asks, mental voice amused and curious.

Mike grins. *Impatient, much?*

*You've left me here with **nothing** to do. I'm bored,* El sing-songs.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, hold your horses, Mike teases as he heads back outside.

He knows she's sensed him coming closer because El doesn't flinch when he opens the car door. "Hold out your hand," he says, grabbing it when she does so. Mike helps El out of the car and gently guides her by the shoulders – up the stairs, in through the door.

It's only after Mike closes the door behind them that he tugs on the blindfold. "You can take it off now," he says in a quiet voice that he hopes isn't shaking too much. *God, he hopes she likes it...*

And, so, as Mike watches, El slips off the blindfold...and gasps. "Oh, Mike...."

Mike's watching her face, eager for any hint of her emotions – her jaw's dropped, eyes wide open, cheeks flushing just a bit. He tries to imagine what it's like for her to take in the sight around them. Because they're in the cabin, the home Hop first gave to El, but it's so, so different.

The couch is pushed up against the wall, out of the way. And, in its place, is a giant blanket fort – *more like a palace*. Two cot mattresses are arranged side-by-side on the floor, covered with a mountain of pillows and blankets, surrounded by a dome of sheets, white and pale blue. Strung inside and around the room are white string lights, giving the room a soft, gossamer glow that is punctuated by the occasional candle.

That's not all Mike's done.

There's food in the fridge for tomorrow so he can make her breakfast

and he's set up a boom box off in the corner. *And, speaking of which....*

Mike heads over and presses play, knowing he cued up the mixtape he made correctly, and the opening strains of "Time After Time" start wafting out from the speakers. He turns to see El staring at him, expression on her face still one of incredulity, a sheen of tears in her eyes, and he smiles softly.

Mike goes up to her and reaches for her hand. "Dance with me," he says, low and soft. El nods, gulping with a heavy breath. He grabs her other hand and reaches up to place them around his neck, remembering the first time they ever danced together – at the Snow Ball, almost 5 years ago. It's with that memory in mind that Mike places his hands on El's hips and holds her close, the two of them swaying gently to the music.

El's still looking up at him, soft awe written across her features, lips pulled upward in a small smile. "I can't believe you did this," she says, shaking her head a bit.

Mike smiles. "You like it?"

El starts playing with the hair at the nape of his neck. "I love it. It's beautiful and romantic and *perfect*."

Mike's smile widens to the point of almost aching. "Good, I'm glad." The words come out with a sigh, an exhale of relief.

El stares up at him, gaze dancing across his face, like she's not sure what she wants to look at. "I love you. So much."

Mike stares back down at her and, for a moment, he's speechless. A million words, a million things he wants to tell her, all leap to the tip of his tongue, all variations on the same theme. *Stay with me. Forever. I'm glad you're here. I love you. You're so beautiful. Never leave me. Marry me.*

The last makes him gasp just a bit. *Marry me*. If he had a ring, he'd ask her – right here, right now. He's still saving, though, still waiting to buy her the ring she deserves.

But, *god*, does he want to ask her. He wants to ask her *so bad*.

Not yet, though. *Someday*.

“I love you,” Mike finally says, his voice hoarse with emotion. He can’t even begin to describe how happy he is in this moment – El in his arms, just the two of them, both of them happy and safe and together, endless possibilities at their fingertips to explore with one another. In all the futures he can imagine, in all the ways he pictures his life turning out, there’s one constant: *her*. By his side, with him, guiding him, anchoring him, building a life with him.

Mike never could have imagined when he met a scared, little girl in the rain that she’d turn out to be the most important thing to ever happen to him. And now he can’t imagine his life without her – *doesn’t* want to. She’s his and he’s hers and it’s the way it’s supposed to be. Always. *Forever*.

Time ceases to have meaning as they sway in each other’s arms, song after song bearing witness to this quietest of moments, just the two of them and the overwhelming love they have for each other. They trade soft kisses and gentle caresses – his hands on her back, hers on his neck and shoulders – all shiver-inducing and heart-pounding, slowly melting against each other.

The opening bars of “At Last” fill the air and El stops dancing, stop swaying. “Mike?” It’s the first either of them have spoken in the last 30 minutes and the sound of his name, spoken with breathy intensity, a bit pleading, makes Mike shiver as he goes still.

“Yeah?” He looks down at her, heart beginning to pick up speed as it races to catch his breath, his chest heaving just a bit. She’s just so *beautiful*, looking up at him with soft eyes framed with long lashes, her lips full and begging to be kissed, all soft, flushed skin and gorgeous curls.

El’s gaze grows heavy-lidded, her pupils beginning to darken. “Love me?”

Mike gulps. He can’t deny her *anything* even if he wanted to – which he doesn’t, like, *at all*. He lifts a hand from her hip up to her hair,

fingers weaving among the strands, tucking beneath one of the loose braids that leads from the hair by her temple and El lets out a quiet, high-pitched gasp that sets Mike's heart racing.

Mike leans forward, forehead pressing against El's, their mouths only an inch away from each other, as his hand continues through her hair to where the two braids meet, tied together with a simple hair tie. Neither of them move as Mike slowly, gently, loosens the braids, removing the ties at the ends, fingers brushing through to free the plaited hair. El clutches at his shoulders the entire time, shivering every so often as his fingers brush against her scalp. And when her hair is finally free, spilling in waves down her shoulders and back, Mike lets his hand trail down the length of it, the skin of his palm and fingers occasionally brushing against the skin of her back.

Both of them are trembling, chests heaving, breath puffing against each other's cheeks. And, still, they're not kissing, mouths barely separated, the space between filled with the most delicious tension, all heart pounding and skin buzzing and just *so good*.

But then, she leans up or he leans down or *both*, and their lips meet in the middle, both of them gasping, breathing in sharply through their noses. It feels like flying, whenever Mike kisses El, soaring and blood rushing and free-falling – impossibly addictive. He could kiss her every moment for the rest of his life and it would never, *ever* be enough.

Mike shivers as El's hands slip down from his shoulders to slide under the lapels of his jacket, forcing his hands from hers as she pushes it off of him, the fabric falling to the ground with a whispered thump. Mike should care, should want to pick up the jacket and hang it up right. But El's touch burns through the thin fabric of his dress shirt as she goes for the buttons of his vest, and her mouth, *god her mouth*, is hot on his, seductively soft as her lips part against his and nothing else matters.

Groaning, Mike slides up one hand from El's hip and gathers her hair with a twisting motion, wrapping the locks around his fist just below her neck. Mike uses the grip as leverage, mouth breaking from hers as he tilts her head, revealing the smooth lines of her neck. His lips press against her jaw and slide up towards her ear before trailing

down her neck, his teeth lightly nipping the skin, his tongue soothing the marks he's leaving behind. All the while, El gasps and moans, body arching against him, even as she's working to unbutton his shirt, vest and tie now hanging open and undone.

Mike's other hand, still by her hip, slides around to press against the bare skin of her lower back, fingers dipping beneath the fabric of her dress to tease the sensitive skin. He lets out a low moan as El presses herself even closer against him, their bodies flush from shoulder to hip, her hands trapped between them as she works at the last of his shirt's buttons. Only when Mike feels El's hands slip inside his now open shirt – palms hot and soft against the skin of his torso, does he release his grip on her hair and take her hips in both hands.

Lifting his head to look at her, Mike just stares for half a second, struck by the flushed cheeks, the swollen lips, the dark, lidded gaze, wanton and loving all at the same time. But then he squeezes her hips and turns her around so that she's facing away from him. He pulls her against him, hands meeting over her waist, feeling the warmth of her through the fabric of her dress, the bare skin of her back pressing against his bare chest. He nudges her head to the side with his own and presses another kiss to her neck, the opposite side from where he was giving attention earlier.

Slowly, his hands move up, fingers trailing along her sides, until he can push her hair over her shoulder with one hand, the other coming up to run a finger down the length of her spine. El gasps at his touch and Mike can't help the grin that stretches his lips. With El's hair draped over the front of her shoulder, Mike's other hand joins with its twin along the skin of her back. And, with excruciating slowness, he reaches for the first knot of the dress along her back, right below her shoulder blades, fingers tugging the strings, loosening the knot, and pulling until the two ends are loose and dangling.

Mike repeats the process with the second knot, both of them trembling, eager, tense excitement filling both of them with delicious heat. And, when both knots are undone, Mike presses his palms against the skin her lower back, hands fanning out, fingers curving around her waist and hips beneath the fabric of her dress. "*Mike,*" El gasps, shivering at his touch, and Mike can't stop the way his hands begin to trail up her sides, her bare skin gliding beneath his palms,

fingers teasing and caressing, up and up until his fingers slip beneath the straps that hold the dress over her shoulders. He loops the thin fabric in the curves between his thumbs and forefingers and guides his hands down her arms, pulling the top of the dress down along with it.

El leans back against him, mirroring the curve of his body as he stands behind her, her head pressing against his shoulder. El pulls her arms free of the straps once he's gotten them down to her forearms and gravity – or El's powers, Mike's not sure which – tugs her dress down the rest of the way to pool at her feet, leaving her standing in only her heels and underwear.

Slowly, *so slowly*, El turns and looks up at him, her hands slipping inside his shirt once more. Mike lets her push the garment from his shoulders as he looks down at her, drinking in the sight of her. Her skin glows in the soft light of the string lights and the candles, luminescent and beautiful. The sight of her never fails to take his breath away, all svelte curves and soft skin, waiting, *eager*, for the touch of his hands, the press of his lips, the weight of his body.

Mike's shirt hits the ground and he surges forward, El meeting him halfway, their mouths meeting as they reach for each other, hands trying, as always, to touch everywhere all at once. Her hands are trailing up his chest as his slide down her back and curl around the underside of her thighs to nudge her up. With El's help, Mike lifts her into his arms, her legs going around his waist, and they make the short journey to the blanket fort, mouths unwilling to break away this time.

Making love to El is never the same from one time to the next. Sometimes it's light and fun, full of laughter and teasing and smiles, all giddy and infectious. At others, it's hot and needy, desperate, insistent touches and bruising kisses, fast and hard and *now*. And, still, at others, it's slow, soft, gentle caresses, whispering kisses, quiet breathing.

This is none of those. Or, maybe, a combination of *all* of those. It's heated kisses and confident caresses, slow and persistent, quiet gasps and low cries. Their hands clutch at each others', gazes locking whenever they're not kissing – unable to look away, unwilling to let

go. It's fathomless passion and never-ending love as they worship one another, bodies moving as one over and over, until they can't tell where one ends and the other begins. Over and over again, they crest and break against each other, with each other, surrounded by each other – *together, always together*.

Later, much later, they lay, wrapped in each other's embrace, sated and exhausted, thin sheen of sweat cooling on their skin.

Perfect, Mike thinks as he falls asleep, limbs heavy with spent pleasure, happy and calm, the quiet surrounding them.

The woman he loves is in his arms and there's nothing else he needs.

Yes. *Perfect*.

The sun streams in through smudged windows. Motes of dust floating in the air are illuminated by the bolts of sunlight, making the air look hazy and heavy.

It's the sight that greets Mike as he opens his eyes, face turned to squint against the light that so rudely woke him up. Still, he sighs contentedly, smile pulling at his lips.

God, he's never felt so relaxed in his entire life.

Smile growing even wider, Mike turns his head to look at the woman sleeping next to him. El's mostly facing him, one shoulder tilted away from him like she's in the middle of rolling onto her back. The sheet that's draped over them does nothing to hide the curves of her body, instead making her look like she's been cast in marble, breathtakingly and sensually beautiful.

Mike shifts so that he facing her all the way, his hand landing gently on her waist, the sheet between his palm and her skin. El is beautiful in sleep – well, she's always beautiful – and her slumber gives him a chance to just *stare* at her, unhurried, unimpeded, no one to interrupt.

Her lips, full and cupid's bowed, are curled up just barely, still a little swollen from the frenzy of their kisses the night before. There's a gentle, sleepy flush that spreads across her cheeks, contrasting just so against the light tan of her skin. Her lashes rest, soft, against the curve of her cheeks and her hair has grown even more wild from sleep, curls gorgeously mussed, beckoning his hand to run his fingers through her tresses.

She's the most beautiful sight he's ever seen.

Mike can't breathe, he's so overwhelmed. His gaze dances over her features, like he's trying to memorize them – like he *hasn't* already done so. He wants to always be with her like this – just the two of them, in bed, nothing between them – where he can marvel at her, where he can treat her and love her the way she deserves.

El shifts a bit beneath his gaze, still asleep, but lets out a tiny whimper as she moves. The sound crawls in through Mike's skin, making him squirm just a bit. Flashes of their night run through his head like snap shots –

(his palm gliding down her thigh to hook her leg around his waist. a hot trail of kisses from her hip to the curve of her thigh and then straight up from there, her hips arching eagerly. her hair tickling his chest, lips pressed to his sternum. the sound of the air leaving his lungs, echoed with the answering sound of her gasp, as their bodies join. her nails scoring down his back, making him shiver. the gasping cry of his name in his ear. their fingers interweaving as they move as one, palms pressed together, intimate, together. the look on her face as she falls apart. the feel of losing himself in her.)

-and Mike has to hold back a groan, even as he marvels at the way his body begins to react.

How does he want her again, so soon? And he wonders: is it always going to be like this, this never-ending, raw, *physical* desire for her?

It's not just that, and you know it.

It's not, Mike thinks with a smile. It's not just about sex, not with the two of them (though he's sure the teenage hormones certainly help

fuel that along).

No, it's more than that. El's his *everything*, the woman he's meant to be with, his one perfect person. Meeting her brought the missing pieces of him back into his life, pieces he hadn't even known were missing until he met her. Every time they're together, be it intimately or not, he feels complete, *whole*. And making love to her, being with her like that, well...it's those missing pieces snapping into place in a way that makes his soul *sing*.

And he gets to be with her for the rest of his life.

How did he get so lucky?

Every day he wakes up, he realizes he must have done something right to have her in his life. And every time she smiles at him, every time she kisses him and holds him and just is with him, is a moment in time Mike will cherish for the rest of his days.

Mike knows how improbable they are, knows how many times he's come close to losing her, and he loves her all the more because of it.

And, someday, he's going to ask her to marry him. Someday, she's going to be walking down the aisle towards him, dressed in white. Someday, they're going to have a family and a home, one they build together (*always together*). And it won't be easy, but they can do anything as long as they're by each other's side. *No one he'd rather do this with.*

Smiling, and a little misty-eyed, Mike reaches up to push El's hair behind her ear, feeling the softness of it pass beneath his touch. She stirs a bit, letting out another whimper, and Mike's smile grows all the wider.

A few moments later, El opens her eyes, startling hazel meeting his own brown ones, and Mike finds it hard to breathe. "Morning," he says softly, still trying to find his breath.

El smiles, soft and sleepy, and lets out a contented moan. "Mmm, morning," she says, rolling the rest of the way back towards him, tipping her face up in invitation.

Mike accepts and leans in, lips brushing against hers, gentle and thrilling at the same time. His heart begins to race, skin prickling with heat, as El wraps her arms around him, pulling herself even closer and hooking a leg over his hip. Their kisses deepen and, moments later, El drags her mouth from his and down his jaw and neck, peppering his skin with kisses.

Mike lets out a low laugh, heavy with desire. “Did you maybe want breakfast first?”

El nips at the skin that stretches over his collarbone, raising her head to look him in the eye, her eyebrows arched with mischief. “Food later. *You* first.”

It’s really hard to argue with that sentiment, *especially* as she punctuates by rolling both of them over so that she’s straddling his waist, her mouth coming down hard on his. Then they’re giggling and moaning, letting passion sweep them away once more, all light and exhilarating and full of laughter.

Mike makes love to her with the light of the morning sun illuminating every inch of her, hair gleaming and skin glowing, and he feels like nothing will ever be as perfect as this.

Afterwards, he makes her breakfast – eggs and bacon and pancakes – and they feed each other as they eat at the counter, her perched on the high surface, him standing between her knees, trading sweet, salty kisses between bites of food.

Eventually, *unfortunately*, it’s time for them to go. El helps clean up, the work going fast with the help of her powers, and they hold hands as they leave the cabin together, unable to go any longer than they have to without touching each other.

And, as they drive away, El pressed up against his side once more, Mike knows that, one day, there will be an endless string of nights and mornings like the ones they just had. Someday, he won’t have to drive her home. Someday, his home will be her home.

Someday, they’ll never have to be apart.

Notes for the Chapter:

So, um, yeah...

Too much?

(Also, [this](#) is El's dress, in case any of y'all are curious)

29. Jun - Aug 1989

Notes for the Chapter:

Haha, so, of course my chapter count increased the second I decided on a final number. I can't guarantee that won't happen again (though I somehow don't think anyone's gonna be complaining, yes?).

Warning: some more suggestive themes ahead. We are dealing with 18 year olds now, after all.

Jun - Aug 1989

June 1989 arrives and brings with it the official end of childhood: high school graduation.

It's a beautiful, happy, ecstatic occasion: everyone wearing the cap and gown in the color of Hawkins High navy blue, the football field covered in folding white chairs for the graduates to sit, proud families and friends sitting on the bleachers. The valedictorian gives an inspiring, heart-warming speech before the principal calls up the names of the graduates one by one. And, one by one, the Party comes up to receive their diplomas, in alphabetical order by last name – Will first, Mike last.

Nancy and Jonathan are back from New York, having just finished up their junior year at college. Steve's with them, and all of the Party's parents – Hop and Joyce, Karen and Ted (who's enough of a father to know he needs to be there at his son's high school graduation and sits awkwardly a few seats away from Hop), Mr. and Mrs. Sinclair, Claudia Henderson, Diane Mayfield. They all cheer (some louder than others – looking at you, *Steve*) as each of their children gets up to cross the stage and shake the principal's hand as she hands over their diplomas.

There's the switching of the tassels and the toss-up of the caps, the sky filling with a sea of navy blue squares. And there's pictures, so many pictures, of each of the Party with their parents, of the Party together in various combinations, of the couples (Mike and El, Max

and Lucas, Dustin and Megan). Everyone's all smiles and full of cheer as they head to their respective graduation dinners before the Party reconvenes later that night for their own celebration (down by the quarry, supplied with a couple of 12-packs of beer Jonathan buys as a graduation present for Will). They build a bonfire and drink beer and celebrate the end of an era.

Then summer begins and everyone starts thinking about the reality of going off to college – what to pack, what to leave behind, what classes are they going to take, how's it going to be living away from home...excited that they're all going to be together.

But, of course, the Party's not the only people thinking about what it's going to be like being away from home...

It's the end of July and a small heatwave has settled in Hawkins. Temperatures routinely top out at 90, 95 degrees with almost unbearable humidity and *everyone* is tired of it, tired and cranky and *hot*.

But there are things that need to be done and, well, the morning has become the best time to do them.

It's just past 7 in the morning when Jim goes to El's room and slowly opens the door. They've been packing and preparing for the move out to Chicago in a few days, both El and Will – boxes everywhere, rolls of packing tape, checklist after checklist to make sure they don't miss anything.

It's weird, Jim thinks. After Sara, he never expected to have any kids to send off to college and now he has *two*. Will's as much his kid as El is and, even though Jim never formally adopted Will (Joyce didn't want to go through the drama of getting Lonnie to go along with the legal process of signing away the rest of his custody), Will's become nothing less than a beloved son to Jim over the past handful of years.

So, now he has two kids going off to college...which means double

the worry. He knows they can take care of themselves (El has her powers, and Will is both resourceful and knows his way around a gun), but it doesn't hurt to be extra prepared.

So Jim's been teaching Mike how to shoot. Over the past few weeks, Jim and Mike have been going out to the middle of the woods so Mike can learn how to handle a gun. The kid's getting better, but it's been a slow journey to "decent" and Jim's running out of time. El, Will, and Max are heading out a few weeks before orientation since their lease starts at the beginning of the month and, well, Mike's going with them. Which, Jim thinks with a roll of his eyes, is only to be expected. Mike and El have *never* weathered any separation well and Mike's perfectly willing to live out of his suitcases for a couple of weeks before his own orientation at Northwestern begins as long as he's by El's side.

It's perfectly devoted...and perfectly *nauseating*. Jim loves the kid, he really does – but there's only so much sappiness a man can take and Mike and El routinely hit that limit.

Still, Jim's happy El has Mike, is happy that she's in love with someone who loves her back just as much. Jim just wants them to be able to take care of each other. Which is why Jim's slowly opening El's door.

Mike has been helping Will and El pack for the past couple of days and, after staying late the night before, just *stayed* over instead of going home. Jim's mostly ok with this – both El and Mike are 18, adults in the eye of the law, and they're going to be living together, sharing a bed, sooner rather than later.

Jim doesn't like to think about it too closely. Doesn't want to think about his daughter could be doing – *is* doing – with her boyfriend in bed. He knows they've been having sex for a while now – you don't get to be Police Chief without *some* detective skills and neither Mike nor El are particularly subtle about the way they act around each other – but they've done a good job keeping it quiet and/or *away* from the house, which Jim is very glad for.

*Haven't walked in on either of them naked and **really** don't want to start now*, Jim thinks as he peers into El's room, hoping, *praying*, that

everyone's dressed.

Luckily, they are, and Jim breathes a sigh of relief as he steps into the room, carefully avoiding the boxes that are scattered across the floor. Mike and El are asleep on top of the covers – him in a t-shirt and boxers, her in a tank top and sleep shorts. The window is open and it'd been too hot to sleep even with a sheet over them. So the only thing covering Mike and El are their clothes and each other. They're facing each other in sleep – Mike holding El close, his arms around her, one hand pressed against her back where her tank top has ridden up a bit; El with her hands in loose fists against Mike's chest, one of her legs hooked over his to tangle them even further. El's head is nestled under Mike's, her face against his neck, his face half covered by her hair.

It's a cute sight – *sweet*, even...and one Jim is both loathe to break up and more than happy to at the same time (*he could be snuggled up in bed holding the woman he loves, too, dammit, but he's gotta make sure the kid knows how to take care of himself so if Jim has to suffer, Mike does, too*).

Jim goes around to Mike's side of the bed and reaches out to give him a shake, hand gripping his shoulder. "Hey, Mike," Jim says, voice quiet. "Wake up."

Mike lets out a groan, one that El echoes a bit more faintly, and he sucks in a sharp breath as some sense of wakefulness creeps into his brain. He turns, squinting a bit against the light that spills in through the open windows. "Hop?" The voice croaking with sleep is a man's now, usually a smoother baritone, and it's just another reminder that makes itself suddenly known that Mike Wheeler isn't a child anymore.

"C'mon, get dressed," Jim says, keeping his voice quiet to try and not wake El. She's even less of a morning person than he is and that's saying something. "Target practice."

Mike gulps and nods. Jim steps back and watches as Mike gently extracts himself from El's embrace, soothing her when she stirs with a gentle kiss to her forehead. Mike finds his discarded jeans on the floor by his side of the bed and slips them on. And, a few moments

later, once his shoes are on, Mike gives Hop a nod, even though the look on his face is still sleepy. "Alright, ready."

The walk out to their usual spot is done in silence and passes with ease. And, soon, the woods around them fill with the sharp crack of gunfire as Mike takes aim at the paper targets Jim set up earlier. Jim keeps one eye on Mike's stance and another on the targets, set up 25 yards out.

Mike fires off the 6 shots in the revolver's chambers. "Clear," he says, lowering the gun the way he was taught – arms straight, elbows loose, shoulders squared with the target. "How'd I do?" Mike asks, turning his head to look at Jim.

Jim nods. "Not too bad," he says, squinting at the target. The shots are grouped into two clusters, three shots each. One's pretty tight, about the size of a quarter, but the others are spread out a little more, about a half dollar in size. "You're definitely getting better. Remember to breathe out before firing each shot. You'll have more control over your aim."

Mike tilts his head in consideration and turns to look at the paper target. "You think there's time for one more session before we leave?"

Jim snorts. "It'd have to be tomorrow, seeing as how we drive out the day after that." Jim reaches into his pocket for the box of ammo he'd brought with him. "Here, reload and give it another try."

Mike reaches in to the box Jim holds out and grabs six bullets, a couple at a time, sliding them into the chamber mostly with ease. He slides the revolving chamber back into place and lines up for another round of shots.

Mike repeats this a couple of times, Jim watching the whole time, until Mike's gone through about two dozen shots. "Alright, good," Jim says. "I think that's enough for today. Let's head back to the house."

"Ok, sounds good," Mike says. A few moments later, as they're starting to head back, Mike turns to Jim and smiles a bit. "I can tell

I'm getting better," Mike says. "Shots are mostly going where I want them to."

Jim nods. "It's just practice," he says. "You're going to make sure you practice, ok? There are gun ranges in the city where you can go. I'll help you find a couple. But you need to make sure those skills stay sharp, all right?"

Mike gulps but he nods in return. "Promise, I'll practice."

Jim grins. Mike never uses the word 'promise' lightly. "Good. I'm counting on you, you know, to keep everyone safe."

That stops Mike short and he stands in place, forcing Jim to stop and turn. "You think I can do it? Keep everyone safe?"

The doubt in Mike's voice is unmistakable and Jim feels his gut twinge when he hears it. Jim knows it's part of the anxiety of moving away from home, of going off to become an adult. But Jim also knows that Mike takes responsibility for *everything*, especially when it comes to his friends and most especially when it comes to El.

Jim takes a couple of steps over and reaches out to lay both his hands on Mike's shoulders. "Mike, the only reason I'm not freaking out about El and Will moving away as much as I am is because I know you're going with them." It's the truth, one that's been building up for years. Jim knows he can count on Mike to watch over everyone, to protect them, to *lead* them. "And you do know you don't have to do it alone, right? If you need me, you can always call me. I'll come over as fast as I can, no matter what. Because like I'm counting on you, you can count on me, you know that, right?"

Mike stares at him, gaze straight level with Jim's – they're the same height and Jim still isn't used to it – and Jim can see the misting of tears that build up in Mike's eyes. Mike gulps, breathing deeply. "Yeah, I know," Mike says, voice thick with emotion. "I – thank you. For *everything*."

Jim can hear the words Mike isn't saying – *thank you for helping, for taking care of me, for letting me in* – and he squeezes Mike's shoulders hard. "Any time, Mike," Jim says before he pulls Mike into a tight

hug. “You’re family, now, and nothing can change that.”

Mike hugs him back and Jim can feel the tension ripple through Mike’s body as he relaxes. They hug tightly for a couple more moments before they pull apart and Jim jerks his head in a quick nod in the direction of the house. “C’mon, let’s get back and get breakfast going. I’m sure you’re hungry and I *know* El will be when she wakes up.”

Mike grins, looking a lot lighter than he did a few moments ago. “She’s awake.” A pause. “She wants me to tell you we need to hurry up.”

Jim rolls his eyes. “Bossy.”

Mike chortles. “Yeah, but we let her get away with it because we love her,” he says as they start walking again.

And they do, both of them, each in their own, very different way. It makes Jim feel warm inside with how much he loves El, with how much he knows Mike loves her, too. “The things we do for the women we love, Mike. Let them walk all over us. Just wait ‘til you get married. Then it’s even worse....”

It’s not as hot, but it’s *way* more humid in Chicago than it is back in Hawkins. El holds her hair of the back of her neck with one hand as she fans herself with the other. All the AC wall units are off since the front door of the apartment is open as they’re still moving stuff in and El desperately wishes she could use her powers to do more of the heavy lifting. But there are too many people around – in the building, on the sidewalks – and El can’t risk it. She does what she can, though, making things lighter as she helps the others carry them, but it still doesn’t keep any of them from having to go up and down the stairs multiple times.

Well, at least my legs will look fantastic, El thinks with a grin.

El takes a moment to look around the apartment as she waits for her body to cool a little. She's standing in the living room, right by the hallway that leads back to the bedrooms. Off to her left is the kitchen and small dining area and off to the right is the rest of the common living space, the living room/family room area. Furniture and boxes are scattered everywhere and El knows it'll take a few days to get everything arranged and unpacked. But, her powers should help for that, since she'll be able to hide them inside of the privacy of their apartment.

God, their apartment. The thought sends a thrill running through her, all excitement and pride and a little fear. She's standing in an apartment that she found, that she signed the lease for, like a *grown-up*. And it's not a bad apartment, either. 1300 square feet, three bedrooms, two bathrooms, enough living space for her, Will, and Max. Max and Will are in each of the two smaller bedrooms, both of them sharing the hall bathroom, while El's stuff sits in the master bedroom with its en suite bathroom and, *god*, she can't wait to be in there alone with Mike, the door closed behind them. *Too bad he's moving into the dorms for his freshman year.* El pouts a little at the thought, but she knows Mike's going to be spending a lot of time over here over the next months, so it's ok enough for the moment.

On cue, as if her thoughts summoned him, Mike comes in through the front door, holding a box labeled "Bathroom" in her handwriting. He smiles as he sees her. "Hey, which bathroom does this go in?"

"Mine," El says, pointing.

"Got it," Mike says and El steps aside so he can head down the hallway, El hot on his heels.

"How much is left?" she asks as he sets the box down in her bedroom, eyeing him appreciatively. Mike's wearing shorts and a white t-shirt, which is damp with sweat, sticking to his torso in *very* interesting ways. *God*, she wants to peel that shirt off of him and trace the freckles she knows litter the skin of his body, wants to taste the sheen of sweat that covers him. *Later*, she thinks.

At this, Mike grins. "I think this is it, unless there's something left in Joyce's car. Her and Hop went back to their hotel, by the way, to

shower and rest before dinner.”

El starts to walk back out towards the living room, Mike behind her, and she goes to the kitchen and grabs a glass out of the box she'd opened earlier. She fills it with tap water and hands it over to Mike, who accepts it with grateful thanks, downing it in seconds. El breathes in sharply as she watches him swallow, adam's apple bobbing, and she wants to trace the length of his throat with her teeth. *Oh, boy....*

“Where are Will and Max?” she asks, her voice going a bit breathy. She doesn't know if it's the heat or *what*, but she's suddenly *very* horny.

“They went to go grab food. I told them whatever is fine, just to grab enough for us and-”

El uses her powers to slam the door shut, cutting him off, and she sidles up to Mike. “Good, we have a bit of time,” she breathes before she grabs him by the shirt and pulls him down for a kiss.

Mike groans, reaching behind him to set the glass down somewhere, *anywhere*, before he kisses her back, his hands coming to hold her by the hips, palms hot through the thin denim of her shorts. Their mouths slant over each other's, passion fed by familiarity, heart-racingly like coming home each time. He's the only man who's ever kissed her, touched her, *been* with her like this and El never wants anybody else. Her body, her heart, her *soul* is for him and him alone and El gasps at the thought, heat roiling through her, the heat of her desire, fed by the temperatures outside.

El breaks the kiss enough so she can mouth words against Mike's lips. “Shower. *Now*.”

“God, I love how you think,” Mike murmurs, voice low and raspy in the way that makes desire pool low in her belly.

El pulls away and grabs Mike's hand, eyeing him seductively over her shoulder as she leads him down the hallway to her bedroom, shivering as she sees and *feels* him eyeing her back, his gaze dark and eager.

Her bedroom door shuts – again, with her powers – after they’re both safely in her room and his mouth is on hers again before she knows it, both of them breathing hard against each other, the sound punctuated with gasps and moans. El’s hands creep up under Mike’s shirt and, true to her thoughts, she peels the fabric off of him, her hands pushing up his torso, feeling his skin, hot and sweat-slicked, beneath her touch.

Mike lifts his arms and helps take his shirt off the rest of the way, letting El focus on pressing her lips to his chest, trailing hot, open-mouthed kisses against his skin, her hands dancing over his ribcage and abdomen. “*Jesus Christ*, El,” he breathes through a moan and El moans back, intoxicated by the taste of his skin beneath her tongue. God, she loves this....

Mike’s hands aren’t idle, though, and his fingers gather the thin fabric of her tank top in fistfuls, forcing her to pull back enough so they can both free her of her shirt. The bra she’s wearing is thin, plain white cotton, but Mike still looks down at her like she’s the most seductive creature on the face of the planet and El wants him all the more.

Their mouths meet once more and, together, they work their way into the bathroom, unable to stop touching each other, hands roaming over familiar lines and curves, touching each other in all the ways they’ve learned how over the past couple of years. Passion burns hot between them, filling them with eager impatience, need driving them beyond thought as they strip each other of their clothes.

They don’t make it to the shower.

Their first time in El’s new apartment is with her perched on the edge of the bathroom counter, his hand braced on the mirror behind her, their loud, impassioned cries echoing off the tiled surfaces. It’s exhilarating, and hot, *so hot*, almost desperate in the way their bodies move against each other, her legs wrapped around his waist, her arms curled under his shoulders to help her move, his body looming over hers, his free hand touching her in ways that drive her wild, their mouths teasing and nipping and *devouring*.

After, they just stay there for a moment, panting against each other, even sweatier than before. El looks up at Mike and the both of them

are grinning like fools. She loves the feel of him pressed against her like this, bodies still joined, Mike warm and solid beneath her touch, his arms strong as they hold her.

“I’m noticing this isn’t the shower,” Mike says, a bit dazed.

El’s grin widens. “It’s the bathroom, at least. So, we’re close.”

“Uh-huh,” he says, teasing. “Wanna try for the shower this time?” he asks, squeezing her hip in a way that makes her giggle and squirm.

Round two is in the shower, beneath the spray of cool water. The edge of their passion has been taken off, but the desire is still just as intense, fueled by the way the water slickens their skin, palms more easily gliding over each other’s bodies. They take their time, washing each other as they love each other, both of them moaning as they find completion, one followed closely by the other.

Mike and El are all smiles and giggles as they get out of the shower, drying off and getting dressed in clean clothes taking longer than necessary since they can’t stop interrupting each other with sweet, gentle kisses. They do get dressed eventually, though, and head out into the living room minutes before Max and Will come back with food – gyros from a small shop a couple blocks away.

Max takes one look at Mike and El and El knows the gig is up when Max rolls her eyes. “We were gone all of 30 minutes and you already had sex in the apartment? God, I can’t believe you two....”

El sticks out her tongue, which makes Max gag. “You just wish Lucas was here.”

“God, put your tongue back in your mouth,” Max says. “I know where that’s been – *gross*.”

Mike grins. “Not this time. Wasn’t enough time for that.”

Now Will’s making gagging noises. “Please, *stop*. I really don’t need any of the details of your sex life. Like, *at all*.”

“Better invest in earplugs, then, Byers,” Mike says.

“I’d tell you to fuck off, Wheeler, but I know what you’d do,” Will says.

Max snorts. “You mean *who* he’d do....”

El glares and sighs. “Alright, that’s enough. C’mon, let’s eat. Thank you, Max and Will, for bringing back food.” They eat, moving onto more benign topics of conversation as they sit at the small table they found at a thrift store.

Later, Hop and Joyce come by, rested from the shower and nap at their hotel, and take everyone out to dinner. It’s all smiles and laughter, even though Dustin and Lucas are back in Hawkins, waiting a couple more weeks before joining the rest of the Party out in Chicago.

Night falls and Max, Will, Mike, and El go back to the apartment and start unpacking, focusing on the bedrooms – arranging furniture, emptying boxes, putting up decorations. They make a good dent in it by the time they call it a night and, soon, Mike and El are crawling into bed, dressed for sleep.

It doesn’t take them long to start kissing, though, the thrill of being on their own spurring them on. Once again, they undress each other – this time beneath the thin covers of El’s bedspread – hands roaming and caressing, mouths connected in hot, *deep* kisses that don’t break even as they move against each other. They spend what feels like half the night making love, unable to get enough of each other, all joyous and rapturous and *together*.

And once they’re spent, laying wrapped up in each other’s arms, exhaustion pulling down on them, El realizes that this is it. This is the start of their new lives, an adventure awaiting that they’ll go on together. And it’s the most exciting thing in the world.

El falls asleep with a smile on her face, Mike’s arms around her, knowing, with every fiber of her being, that this is only the beginning.

Jim looks around the apartment, everything still mostly packed into boxes, furniture placed awkwardly before all the pieces find their final home. He knows that soon, over the next few days, everything will find its home, will be put into place.

But he won't be here to see it.

Oh, sure, he'll be back to visit eventually. But, in a few short minutes, Jim and Joyce will be driving home to Hawkins...and leaving their children behind in Chicago.

The thought suddenly tightens up in his throat and some, not-so-insignificant part of his brain thinks: *I'm not ready.*

"Dad?"

Jim turns to look at El, who's standing just a few feet away by the entrance to the kitchen. Mike is by her side, leaning against the counter that acts as a wall between the kitchen and the living room, and Jim's heart lurches a bit. Off to the side, he can hear Joyce with Will, the both of them fussing at each other – "Sweetie, you need to make sure -" "Mom, it's *ok*, just leave it." – and he knows she's going through the same thing he is, but she just shows it differently.

"Dad, you ok?" El repeats.

"Not really," Jim says, knowing he can't lie to her. "Just hitting me, I think. What all this means. I'll be ok, though."

El smiles, a little watery, and comes over, Mike on her heels. "I'll see you for Thanksgiving, at the latest. And I'll call home, I promise."

Jim reaches out and pulls El into a tight hug. "You better." He feels El hug him back and he can't believe, just *can't*, that she's so grown up now, that she's about to embark on the rest of her life. He hopes he's prepared her well enough, hopes that he did everything he could.

"I'll make sure she does, Hop," Mike says, the words fond and gentle, good humor laid over in a way that Jim knows is supposed to be soothing, but only drives the point home of just how much Mike's

grown up that he's trying to take care of Jim instead of the other way around. And Jim's touched in ways he never knew were possible.

So, without warning, Jim reaches out and pulls Mike into the hug, holding both of them close. He feels Mike freeze for a second, startled by the action, but Mike hugs him back a moment later and the three of them are standing in a strange huddle that part of Jim never wants to break up. "You two take care of each other, ok?" he says, voice gruff with emotion in a way that even *he* can hear it. "And if you need anything, *anything*, you call me."

"We will," El says, words a bit strained, like she's trying to hold back her emotions. "We will."

"Good, good," Jim breathes. He stays like that for a few moments before releasing the hug, but keeps a hand on one of both of their shoulders' as he pulls back. He looks at the both of them and feels nothing but wistful pride. Mike and El have both turned into fine adults – strong, compassionate, smart, resourceful – and Jim knows they'll be fine, knows he had a hand in getting them this far. And he knows they'll have each other, that they'll *always* have each other, and the sheer *relief* that sweeps through him at the thought is almost overpowering.

"Alright, well, we should probably get on the road," Jim says. "Don't want to get back into town too late."

El nods. "Yeah, probably not a bad idea." She wraps her arms around his torso in a quick, tight hug. "Love you, Dad."

"Love you, too, Ellie."

There's a flurry of last minute hugs, Joyce needing to wrap her arms around all of the kids – *not kids anymore, though* – and sooner than Jim would like, he and Joyce are in the car, both of them with eyes that burn with tears, though neither of them are actually crying.

"We did it, Jim," Joyce says as Jim merges onto the freeway. "We made it."

Jim reaches out with his right hand and grabs Joyce's left, his thumb

brushing over the diamond of the engagement ring she wears, just above the wedding band he put on her finger three years ago. “No, they did it, Joyce. We just helped.”

Joyce lets out a laugh, though it's a bit sad and filled with suppressed tears. “I'm so proud of them.”

“Me too, Joyce. Me too.”

The stars are bright in the sky just outside of Hawkins. It's a warm night, perfect for stargazing – soft flannel blanket beneath them, another thin blanket spread over them.

Or, rather, it's a perfect night for snuggling together, somewhere where it's quiet and they won't be bothered.

Dustin sighs as he blinks up at the starry night above. Megan's lying next to him, one arm thrown over his chest, her head pillowed on his shoulder. Their clothes are scattered around them, leaving them naked beneath the blankets. It hadn't been his intention to have sex (at least, not entirely), but Dustin certainly isn't complaining, like, *at all*.

“This is nice,” Megan says, the words breathing out around a sigh of contentment.

Dustin lets out a chuckle. “The sex or the outdoors?”

Megan giggles. “The sex outdoors. It's a nice change of pace from the backseat of your car.”

“Hey, don't knock the backseat,” Dustin says. “A lot of good times in that backseat.”

“Kinda cramped, though,” Megan says, turning so her chin's propped up on his chest and she can look at his face. She grins, all full of mischief. “Hey, remember when you cramped up that one time? Good times.”

Dustin flushes at the memory, both from embarrassment and from a bit of desire. Oh, he remembers it, all right. "Thus the Great Backseat Oral Sex banning of 1988," Dustin says, grumbling a bit. "Bummer for both of us."

"Mmm, well, not a problem when we're outside with plenty of room," Megan says. "As we recently proved."

Dustin grins, pride and satisfaction blooming in his chest. "Hey, never let it be said that I don't know how to take care of my girlfriend." Megan's face falls and Dustin frowns, reaching out with a hand to smooth over her hair, tucking some of it behind her ear. "Hey, what is it?"

Megan sighs. "I told myself I wasn't going to bring this up, but...." She pauses, propping herself up on her arm so she can look down at him. "What are we going to do in a week when we're half way across the country from each other?"

Dustin feels the weight of a million emotions settle over his heart – anxiety and sadness the predominant ones, with fear, love, and hope following soon behind it. "I don't know," Dustin says, voice feeling small. "I don't want to let go of you." He shifts both of them so that they're lying facing each other. His heart skips a beat when he takes a moment to just look at her, drinking in the beauty of her lying beside him, illuminated faintly by the light of the stars above. "But I don't know how to stop it."

Megan smiles and it's a little shaky. "Then let's not let go," she says, reaching up to press her palm against his cheek, her fingers resting lightly against his skin. "People do long-distance all the time, right?"

A pang of hesitancy hits him, but Dustin ignores it, smiling at the hope the options presents, and he reaches for it with both hands. "They do, you're right. And it doesn't hurt to at least try, right?"

Megan's smile widens and she lets out a small, relieved laugh. "Right, yes." She giggles and leans in close, pressing her lips to his in a sweet, soft kiss. "I love you, Dustin."

Dustin's breath catches in his throat. It's not the first time he's heard

her say it, but it gets him every time. “I love you, too, Megan.” And his heart feels full, so full, that it crowds out everything else, leaving only love and hope left behind.

He’s been through worse things. And there’s phones and school breaks spent in Hawkins. He’ll see her and talk to her and it’ll be fine, *it will*.

(it won’t. megan and dustin will break up winter break of their sophomore year. the distance will be too hard, there’ll be too many ways they’re growing apart, and it’ll be too hard not being with each other for all the things that matter, big and small. they won’t want to break up – they’ll still love each other so very, very much – but it won’t be fair to either of them to stretch things out like this.

*it won’t be the end of them, though. they won’t know it when they break up, but the universe has a strange way of rearranging things to its liking. and one day, **one day**, they’ll live in the same city again. one day, they’ll meet back up, all fond smiles and polite pleasantries and hugs that are a bit too familiar. and then, as the universe is wont to do, things will go from there....)*

For Mike, the first couple of weeks in Chicago are nothing short of amazing. Being on his own in a new city is kinda scary...but it’s a little less scary with his friends and his girlfriend by his side. The sheer amount of *freedom* is almost overwhelming and, though Mike figures it has to wear off eventually, the novelty is still thrilling.

The four of them – Will, Max, Mike, and El – spend those first two weeks exploring the city as they wait for Dustin and Lucas to follow. Chicago is a big city with *a lot* to do, so there’s no shortage of places to explore, no end of things to see, and they marvel at the sights like tourists.

Some of their time is spent in more mundane, smaller adventures – learning to navigate the L, figuring out the laundromat, going grocery shopping on their own for the first time, just being *adults*. There are

few mishaps – getting turned around and heading the wrong direction on the L, adding too much detergent to the laundry, not buying enough at the grocery store, buying *too much* at the grocery store – but they're all quick learners.

And, still, some of their time is spent just *trying* things. Chicago is also a city with an astounding amount of food options, foods from all sorts of cultures and ethnicities.

Which is how, the night before Dustin and Lucas are scheduled to meet them, Mike finds himself sitting next to El at a sushi restaurant. A small frisson of uncertainty fizzles through him as he looks down at the menu and he glances around the table, seeing if the others are feeling the same.

It was Max's idea to come here, having passed by the small restaurant on their explorations, and she'd been so excited about the idea – “Do you know how long it's been since I had sushi? *Years*. We are *going*.” – that no one had been able to deny her the opportunity. Still, Mike notices, neither Will nor El look as uncertain as he feels, which is not entirely unexpected. El is all about trying new things – 12 years locked in a lab will do that to a person – and Will is the least picky eater on the face of the planet. So, Mike swallows down his uncertainty. He doesn't want to look like a wuss.

“So, people really eat raw fish?” El asks, her fingers tracing over the menu, the quiet curiosity in her voice almost sounding like marvel. Mike can't help but smile at the sound and, for probably the millionth time over the past couple of weeks, his heart skips a beat when he realizes that they made it, him and El, that they're starting their lives together.

And, he realizes, that he's kinda not looking forward to moving into the dorms in a couple of days. For the past two weeks, he's spent practically every minute of every day with her and it's everything he's ever wanted – falling asleep for real with her, waking up with her in his arms, snuggling in bed while they read or watch TV, walking down the streets with her hand in his at all hours of the day, making love to her whenever they want. Mike just knows that he's going to spend a significant amount of time at El's apartment, so much that it's starting to make him wonder if he should even live in

the dorms past his freshman year. *Might as well cut to the chase on this one.*

“Oh, yeah,” Max says in response to El’s question. “All the time. I particularly like the salmon, but tuna’s pretty good, too. I’ll order for everyone, yeah? So you can try a bit of everything.”

The server comes by and Max takes the lead, ordering a variety of things, so many it makes Mike’s head spin a bit. But Max sounds like she knows what she’s doing, so Mike just listens and tries to learn.

“That sounded like a lot,” Will says after the server walks away. “Are we going to be able to eat it all?”

Max smiles. “Don’t worry,” she says. “It’s not as much as it seems. C’mon, you guys should practice using chopsticks before the food comes out.”

“People don’t use forks for sushi?” Mike asks.

Max snorts. “Well, not in Japan, Wheeler. And, besides, why would you mar the beautiful fish by stabbing it with a fork? Blasphemy.”

Mike arches an eyebrow – it all ends up in your mouth, not like it matters how it gets in there – but he keeps quiet. They all practice using chopsticks on the paper wrappers the wooden utensils came in and only manage to become barely proficient by the time the food comes out.

“Wow,” El says, looking at the platters that now sit in the middle of the table. “Pretty.”

It’s true, Mike has to admit. There’s fish on rice, all gleaming and richly colored; there’s colorful rolls, wrapped in seaweed, stuffed with more fish and rice; and then there’s just slices of fish, fanned out as they lay over one another. And, surprisingly, it looks pretty good?

“Oh man,” Max breathes. “I think I’m gonna love living in Chicago.” She looks around at rest of the table. “So, who wants to do the honors and have the first piece?”

“I will,” Mike says, leaping to volunteer before he can stop himself.

He doesn't want to be the last person to try this new food, doesn't want to seem like he's scared (he's not, not *really*, it's just a little weird, right? That people eat raw fish? But, people do it every day, Max said so, and they don't all die....).

"Alright, Wheeler," Max says, her voice filled with teasing pride as she fills a tiny dish with soy sauce. "Which piece you want?"

"Um, this one," Mike says, pointing at a piece of dark pink fish that's been laid over a small pat of rice.

"Tuna nigiri," Max says for his clarification. "Now, you can dip it in soy sauce if you want, but you might want to try it without it first so you know what it tastes like."

Fair enough. Mike reaches for the piece with his chopsticks and, after a couple of tries, abandons the idea of using chopsticks, instead picking up the tuna with his fingers. His index finger presses against the fish, which isn't at all slimy like he thought it might be – it's wet and cool, but not slimy, which eases some of his uncertainty a bit.

And, before he can talk himself out of it, Mike pops the whole thing in his mouth.

His first thought is that it tastes nothing like the ocean – he was expecting salty, briny. His next is that the gentle tang of the rice pairs nicely with the clean taste of the tuna. And his final thought is that it's good, *really* good. It's this thought that he voices. "Wow, that's...."

"Good, right?" Max says. She looks to Will and El. "Come on, you two. It's your turn!"

El goes next, then Will – El trying a piece of yellowtail tuna, Will trying a piece of a salmon roll – and then they're all racing to try everything, Max all the while looking like a proud parent.

"Too bad Dustin and Lucas aren't here," Will says. "It'd be nice to do this with them."

Max snorts. "No, it's better with us first. They'd be bitching and complaining and just acting grossed out the entire time. I love both of

them – believe me, I do – but they’ll be more inclined when they try it the first time if they see you eating like it’s no big deal. They won’t want to be showed up by you guys.” Max rolls her eyes. “Boys.”

El giggles and Mike turns to look at her, eyes narrowed in a playful glare. “Hey!”

El looks back over at him and leans in, brushing her nose against his before giving him a quick peck on the lips. “You don’t count. You’re different.”

Mike feels the familiar thrill skitter across his skin at the press of her lips to his – *will it ever stop being that way? God, he hopes it never does* – but he still maintains his playful glare. “I don’t know if that’s any better. Are you saying I’m not a boy?”

Max lets out long-suffering sigh before El can respond. “Oh god, I can already tell this is going to devolve into schmoopy flirting and, I beg you, please *stop*.”

“Seconded,” Will says around a bite of sashimi.

El pouts. “You guys never let me have any fun.”

“Oh, *please*,” Max says. “From the noises that come from your room at night, I say we let you have *plenty* of fun.”

Mike feels the light warmth of a blush cross his cheeks – and notices that El blushes, too. “I told you guys. Earplugs.”

Max throws her napkin at him. “It’s my home, Wheeler! Not yours! You get your own place and you can be as loud as you want in it.”

El smiles, a bit smug. “But it’s *my* home, too, Max. So there.”

Will groans. “That’s not how you win an argument, El.”

El just shrugs loftily. “Still, made my point.”

Everyone laughs and Mike reaches for El, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. He pulls her close and presses a kiss to the top of her head. “I love you,” he says, heart so full, he feels like it might burst.

There's no reason for it, other than he's just happy to live in this moment, surrounded by his friends and the woman he loves, just being with them and having fun and experiencing all of this together.

El's answer is to lean in closer and kiss him, smiling as her mouth presses against his, all soft and alluring and inviting. Mike tilts his head to deepen the kiss, the hand not on her shoulder coming up to cup her cheek.

And, even though he can hear the complaining and groaning of Max and Will on the other side of the table, Mike doesn't pull away. Because the feel of El's lips on his is *everything*.

And he's never going to give it up.

The next day, Lucas and Dustin finally join them in Chicago, arriving 45 minutes later than planned because, to quote Dustin, "Lucas kept making wrong turns".

"Well, you kept following me," Lucas spits back. "You could have said something over the SuperCom."

"Please, like I knew where I was going. I was relying on you, Mr. Navigator."

"Guys, please, can we not fight about this?" Will says as they help Lucas and Dustin get some things for overnight up to the apartment. Most of their stuff is still in their cars since Lucas and Dustin, along with Mike, are all heading up to Northwestern the next morning for their orientation. Which lines up nicely with Max and El's orientation at University of Chicago.

They get upstairs, Dustin marveling a bit at the layout of the apartment, and no one says anything *at all* when Max turns to Lucas and says, "Let me give you a tour of my room." She then proceeds to drag Lucas down the hall, shutting the door with a decisive "click" moments later.

“Who wants to explore the neighborhood?” El asks, wanting to give the reunited couple a bit of privacy.

The trio of boys erupt in an immediate chorus of “yes, please”, “sounds good”, and “god, yes”, none of them wanting to stick around for any of the noises that are sure to be emanating from behind Max’s closed door in no time at all.

“Though, it would be sweet, sweet payback, to force you to stay, see what it feels like to hear your friends doing it,” Will says, narrowly eyeing Mike and El.

El refuses to feel guilty, but she does inwardly acknowledge that maybe she and Mike can do a better job of keeping quiet. But it’s just so *hard* when she’s with him like that, when he makes her forget who she is with how he kisses her and touches her and loves her.

So, she lets it go without remark and, instead, ushers the others outside to go explore the streets of Chicago, this time to show Dustin around.

When they come back a couple hours later, Lucas and Max are snuggled on the couch, all soft, knowing smiles and gentle kisses, unable to stop touching each other. It’s sweet, El thinks, how far Max and Lucas have come, how much they’ve gone through to get here. It’s reassuring and hopeful, like there are some things that are just the way they’re meant to be.

They all have dinner together, Will and El working together to make a meal in their new home, and the 6 of them sit around the coffee table in the living room as they eat, the beginning of a tradition that will last for years. It’s full of laughter and teasing and talk of what freshman year at college is going to be like, all hopes and dreams and fears. It’s all El’s ever wanted and she hopes beyond hope that parts of this will always remain.

And then it’s heading on towards time for everyone to go to bed. Lucas is bunked with Max and Dustin is set up on the couch as everyone settles in.

El lays in bed, book propped on her chest, but she’s barely reading as

she listens to Mike. He's sitting next to her, leaning against the headboard, as he talks to his mom, having made a collect call to call home.

"...yeah, I'm pretty excited to meet my suitemates," Mike says. "It'll be interesting, at least." Mike, Lucas, and Dustin are sharing a 6-person suite in the dorms, each of them in their own room with a common bathroom and living space for just the 6 of them. El's just happy Mike has his own room, which'll make spending the night with him on campus a lot easier. She's under no illusion that they'll be spending all their time in her apartment.

There's a pause and El can hear the low murmur of Karen's voice, but she can't make out the words. Still, she can guess what Karen said by how Mike responds. "I got most of my classes how I want them. I'm still on the waitlist for the Chemistry section I wanted, so we'll see how that goes."

El puts her book down and closes her eyes, knowing that she's not going to get much more reading done. *Tell your mom I say hi*, she says through their connection, smiling as Mike jumps a bit in surprise.

"Oh, and El says hi, by the way...Yeah, she's here next to me...Yeah, her orientation starts tomorrow, too." El can hear the phone shifting as Mike pulls his mouth away from the receiver. "Mom says hi, back." Another shift as Mike starts talking to Karen again. "Yeah, we're going to bed soon. I need to move all my stuff over in the morning, anyway, and it's better to do that before it gets too hot. Hawkins weather has *nothing* on Chicago's, I swear...."

There's a bit more crosstalk, Karen given Mike some last minute advice or encouragement, before Mike wraps up the call. "Ok, Mom. I'll talk to you soon. Love you. Bye." He hangs up the phone and El opens her eyes, looking up at her boyfriend. There's an anxious look on his face, like it's all starting to hit him.

"You ok?" El asks, reaching up from her reclined position to grab Mike's hand. She twines her fingers with his and tugs him down. Mike slides down and El shifts so that she's facing him. For a moment, Mike doesn't say anything, so El prompts him again. "Mike?"

Mike licks his lips and sighs. "Just...a little scared, I guess. It's *college*, El. It's a really big deal. What happens if I fail? What happens if I don't know what I want to do?"

El smiles and extends a hand, palm resting against Mike's cheek. "We'll figure it out," El says. "We always do." She lets out a small laugh. "But, you could always ask Nancy for advice. She's probably gone through the same thing. Did you want to talk to her?"

Mike breathes out a laugh. "No, that's ok," he says, hand coming up to cover hers, fingers curling in the spaces between her fingers, his palm cupping the back of her hand. "It's late where she is and...if I need her, I can call later. I'm just freaking out a bit, I guess."

"It makes sense, though," El says. "It is a scary step we're taking. We just have to remember that we have each other."

Mike uncurls his hand from El's and begins trailing the tips of his fingers along the length of her arm, making El very aware that she's only wearing a tank top and a pair of underwear as she shivers a bit under his touch. "Hmm, that we do," he says, voice going quiet. "I love you, by the way. In case I haven't told you that recently."

El smiles. "Not in the last couple of hours, you haven't." She leans in and kisses him softly, feeling more than hearing the quiet gasp he pulls in through his nose. "I love you, too."

Mike stares at her for a second, eyes a bit wide, lips parted, before he's leaning back in, mouth pressed against hers once more in a kiss that is not as soft as the one she gave him, but filled with intent. His hand slides down from where it landed at her shoulder to the hem of her tank top, fingers slipping beneath the fabric to caress the skin of her lower back. El moans and, as if on reflex, hooks her leg over his hip, pulling him closer to her. Mike groans and pulls his mouth from hers to press a series of hot kisses up her jaw and down to her neck, rolling them so he's over her where he has better access to her skin.

"Mike," she breathes, half in exclamation, half in warning. "We should try and be quiet."

Mike laughs against her collarbone. "No, *you* should try and be

quiet,” he says, nipping at the skin beneath his lips. His hand has trailed up along the skin of her torso and now rests beneath the underside of her breast, fingers curled around the curve of her ribcage, her tank top bunching as he pushes it further and further up her body.

El huffs at the accusation. *Well, she's not going to stand for this.* Using her powers, El flips them over so she's above him, her knees on either side of his waist. She takes a moment and just looks down at him. Mike's looking up at her, eyes full of an intoxicating combination of awe and desire and love that just takes her breath away. Smiling – or, rather, *grinning* – El reaches for the hem of her tank top which has fallen back down to her hips and slowly, *so slowly*, lifts her arms, pulling her tank top up and off her body. She hears Mike's gasp as her upper body is bared to him and it sends a thrill down her spine. He's seen her naked so many times and, still, he's blown away by the sight of her every time.

El shakes her hair to work some sense of the order back into her curls that removing her tank top upended and looks back down at Mike. His hands on her hips are now gripping her tight, fingers digging into her skin and El feels the heat of her desire loosen all her joints, making her feel languid and seductive. “See something you like?” she asks, voice coy and teasing.

“Holy fuck, *El*,” Mike breathes and, for a moment, they're frozen like that, staring at each other, her straddling his waist, his hands on her hips holding her tight enough to bruise, their eyes locked in a long, breathless gaze. And then Mike shifts beneath her, sitting up so he can kiss her, one hand coming up to tangle in her hair while his mouth captures hers over and over again in hot, eager kisses.

El whimpers against Mike's mouth, feels herself getting lost in the sensations Mike sets off along every inch of her skin, the fire he sets ablaze in her veins.

Mike gets just as lost in her as she does in him and, soon, there's no thought, just sensation, all love and passion. El tries to keep quiet, she really does, but she can't keep everything back and it makes her giggle later, as they lay in the afterglow.

“What?” Mike asks, voice husky and a bit sleepy.

“Nothing, just...Will’s gonna kill us, you know that, right?” El asks, looking over at him. The light from the street below is all that illuminates them, giving Mike an almost otherworldly glow. *God, he’s so pretty.*

Mike lets out a laugh and his hand ghosts across her stomach in a gentle caress. “Well, tough shit,” he says. “There’s nothing wrong with what we’re doing. He’s just envious. Besides, this is why they invented earplugs.” Mike lets out a sigh and completely switches the topic. “I wish I wasn’t moving into the dorms tomorrow,” he says, quiet and a little sad.

“Your parents already paid for room and board, though,” El reminds him.

“I know,” Mike says. “It’s just...I like being here with you. It would be so much cheaper for me to just move in.”

“Yeah, not sure what your parents paid is refundable,” El says. “Besides, it’s not like we’re not going to be spending every night together. If not here, then in your dorm.”

Mike hums in response, leaning over to press a soft kiss to her shoulder. “Hmm, I suppose that’s true,” Mike says. “But you have your own bathroom here. That’s not a luxury we’re gonna have in my dorm room.”

El pokes Mike in the ribcage lightly, feeling him squirm a bit beneath her touch. “We’ll deal, we always do.”

“Yeah,” Mike says with a smile. “We always do.”

Smiling, El leans over and kisses him, lips soft and lingering. “Love you,” she breathes.

Mike pulls her closer, El twisting in his grip so that he’s spooning her, his arm tight around her waist. There’s nothing like being wrapped in his arms. *Nothing.* “Love you, too,” Mike says a moment later, breath tickling her ear.

In the morning, they both get up early, Mike loading his stuff up into his car, El making sure she has everything on her list so she and Max can make the commute to school with public transportation.

This is it, El thinks, the start of the next four years of her life. There's a lot of unknowns in front of her, a lot still to be discovered. But El knows that, no matter what, she'll have Mike and her friends by her side. The thought brings a sense of relief to El's stressed nerves and it lets her get through the day – getting oriented on campus, buying her textbooks, experience the club fair, the sorority fair.

And, after it's over, she and Max make their way up to Evanston, the small town where Northwestern is located, El finding their way to Mike's dorm room by using the connection she shares with him. They meet the other three suitemates who Mike, Dustin and Lucas will be living with for the next 9 months (two sophomores – friends – and another freshman who doesn't have any friends at Northwestern) before splitting off for dinner at a diner just off campus.

That night, Mike and El snuggle in Mike's new, extra-long twin bed, him grumbling about missing her bed – “so much bigger than this postage stamp of a bed” – her trying to console him through her giggles. But they manage to fall asleep, wrapped up in each other, secure in the knowledge that no matter what happens, they have each other.

Even if Mike's bed is, in fact, *way* too small.

Notes for the Chapter:

And college has begun!

We really are coming round the home stretch now. I really, really appreciate y'all sticking around for as long as you have, for coming with me on this journey. It's been an absolute blast. Really, I love this fandom. *hugs all of you*

30. Aug 1989 - May 1990

Notes for the Chapter:

And I'm back! Sorry it took a little longer than usual. I'm sick (yay pneumonia!) and this ended up being longer than usual.

So, you get 17k words about their first year of college, including a special detour for one Will Byers (*Let Will Byers Be Happy in ST3*)...

Note: I'm dedicating this chapter to the adorable, ineffable EvieSmallwood for being the light of my life. I love you, boo. Never stop being my friend.

Aug 1989 - May 1990

The first few weeks of college are a wild, crazy ride for the Party. Between trying to figure out their way around their respective campuses and coordinating 6 different schedules so they can spend as much time together as possible, it's surprising that they adjust as quickly as they do. But, the 6 of them have never been anything other than quick studies and it doesn't take them long to settle into a rhythm – dinners together most nights of the week, weekends spent together just hanging out or studying as the semester gets further and further underway.

To the surprise of nobody, Mike and El spend almost every night together. More often than not, Mike stays over at the apartment, preferring El's larger bed to his own smaller one. But, sometimes, they stay the night in his dorm room, usually if Mike has a test the next day or a late class earlier that night. So, El can't help but start to get to know Mike's suitemates besides Lucas and Dustin.

There's the other freshman, James Chen, who's quiet with a sly sense of humor that takes some coaxing to unearth. And then there's the two sophomores, Jeff Mason and Aaron Gertz, friends from their freshman year, who like playing the wise older classmen to the four freshman they've been housed with.

El likes all of them well enough, but she doesn't know them super well. And, sometimes, they look at her like they can't believe she's with Mike, which makes her a little annoyed, but she's getting pretty good at ignoring it.

She doesn't know, though, that they're just trying to make sense of her and Mike, as well....

Jeff Mason is very well aware that his suitemate situation could have been much, *much* worse.

For instance, he could have been rooming again with his freshman year roommate, who smelled like moldy cheese and always left his dirty clothes all over the floor, even on Jeff's side of the room.

That was the worst.

No, Jeff was positive that, at the very least, sharing a living space with Aaron was going to be miles better than rooming with Clint. And not just because Aaron was a closet neat-freak – Aaron was his best friend. Jeff and Aaron were both from the Seattle area, but had only met once they'd gotten to Northwestern and bonded over their shared major, biochemical engineering. So, when Aaron proposed they try to get into one of the suites in the singles dorm, Jeff immediately agreed. One, he'd have his own room and, two, he'd get to live with his best friend. How much better could it get?

Jeff hadn't had too many friends back in Bellevue and the ones he'd had scattered to the four winds as they all went off to different colleges. He and his high school friends hadn't been really close, either – mostly hanging out with each other out of a lack of anyone else to hang out with. Jeff wouldn't describe himself as shy, necessarily; he just didn't like to make the effort into making friends if he didn't think the other person was going to be worth it.

Still, Jeff was curious about who his other 4 suitemates were going to be, thinking it might be nice to make more friends than the handful

he had.

Someone like James Chen, Jeff had been expecting – a quiet, Chinese kid from DC whose parents work at the State Department while he goes off to Northwestern to study astrophysics.

But the other three throw Jeff for a bit of a loop. Because he wasn't expecting three best friends from a small town in Indiana who were closer than brothers.

Jeff thinks he could come to like Mike, Lucas, and Dustin – they're all pretty cool and equally nerdy. But there's a secret language the three speak that Jeff knows he'll never fully understand, a short hand of inside jokes and gestures that are built up over a lifetime of friendship.

And then there's Mike and Lucas' girlfriends.

When everyone's meeting as they're moving in, once everyone figured out which room is theirs, James finds himself wedged between Aaron and Mike's rooms on the left half of the suite, with the other three rooms on the right side on the other side of the common area. This is when Dustin claps Jeff on the shoulder with a shit-eating grin. "Good luck, dude," is what Dustin says.

Jeff raises an eyebrow. "What for?"

"You're sharing a wall with Mike. You're gonna need all the luck you can get."

"Why, does Mike snore?"

Lucas, who's putting stuff away in the bathroom, overhears this and laughs, while a nearby Mike exclaims "Hey!"

"You'll find out soon enough," Dustin says with a waggle of his eyebrows.

The conversation is dropped and soon forgotten...until just before dinner when there's a knock at the door to the suite and Jeff goes to open it...

...And sees two of the most beautiful women he's ever laid eyes on. But before he can even speak, Jeff hears Mike behind him. "Hey, Lucas, Dustin! El and Max are here!"

Jeff finds himself stepping aside as the two women enter the suite... and immediately go to Mike and Lucas. The gorgeous redhead – Max – greets Lucas with a short, sweet hello kiss. But the other woman – El, with long, honeyed curls and the face of an angel – goes over to Mike and, within seconds, are kissing like it's been days since they've seen each other – his hands in her hair as he leans over her, her hands fisting in her shirt while she stretches up on her toes. They kiss like they don't care if anyone is watching and it makes Jeff a little uncomfortable even as he's a little awed by it.

"They're always like this," Dustin says. "You should try to get used to it."

The Indiana contingent all leave for dinner, leaving Aaron, Jeff, and James behind. But when they come back, and it's clear that Max and El are spending the night with their respective boyfriends, Jeff suddenly remembers Dustin's warning from earlier.

The only problem with the dorms: the walls are not that thick and the beds, mass produced and kinda cheap, creak at the slightest of movements. So it's very, *very* obvious whenever anyone has sex in one of them. Which Mike and El do. Very frequently.

The first night he overhears them, they aren't being terribly loud. It's just the aforementioned walls and beds hide *nothing*. So he hears the sounds of the bed moving with that telltale rhythm, hears the occasional giggle or moan or cry. At first, it's kinda hot. Because, really, he's only 19 years old and well, the sounds of two people having sex...yeah.... But as the semester wears on, it becomes increasingly less hot and a lot more annoying. Mostly because Jeff hasn't figured out how to bring it up in a way that won't make him turn bright red with embarrassment.

Luckily, Mike spends a little more than half his nights at El's apartment in Chicago, so Jeff doesn't have to hear it *every* night. Still, he asks Lucas about it about a month into the semester. "So, are Mike and El always like...?" Jeff trails off with a vague hand gesture that

he hopes get across his meaning.

Lucas smiles at him from where they're sitting on the couch in the common area, flipping through the channels on a search for something to watch. "All over each other?" Lucas asks. "Yeah. It's just how they are, man. My advice is buy some earplugs and get used to walking in on them making out."

Jeff doesn't ask any more questions. Not for a couple of weeks, at any rate.

It's a Thursday morning and Jeff and Aaron are sitting on the couch, passing a box of Cinnamon Toast Crunch back and forth, eating the cereal one dry handful at a time as they watch reruns of "The Dick Van Dyke Show". It's fairly quiet except for the TV...until the door to Mike's room opens and a girlish giggle escapes.

Jeff and Aaron exchange a quick, wry look before they look over at the door to see El practically *skipping* from Mike's room, looking over her shoulder with a bright, gorgeous smile on her face, wearing the clothes she was wearing yesterday – tight, acid washed jeans and soft purple sweater, her hair up in a loose ponytail of wild curls. She lets out another laugh as Mike comes after her and wraps his arms around her from behind, all long limbs as he curls his body around hers. "Mike, I need to go to class!" El says, giggling, though she's not fighting too hard to get out of the circle of Mike's arms.

"No, you don't," Mike says. "You need to stay here with me." To punctuate his point, Mike leans over and presses his lips to El's neck. Like a switch flipping, El just *melts* in Mike's arms, breathing out a gasping moan, slumping a bit against Mike's t-shirt covered chest.

"Mike," El breathes before she gathers herself enough to turn around in Mike's arms, looking up at him like he hung the sun, moon, and stars in the sky. "Mike, I have to go. Seriously."

Mike groans, the sound trailing off in a bit of a whine. "C'mon, it's just one class," he says, lifting one hand to tangle with the hair behind her ear despite the ponytail. He presses a kiss to her cheek while his other hand rests low on her hip, fingers dangerously close to the curve of her behind.

“Mike,” El says again, trying to be firm.

“Stay with me,” Mike says, low and persuasive. His lips move from her cheek to her jaw. El’s hands come up to clutch at Mike’s arms, her fingers digging into his biceps. “I need you,” Mike says as his mouth slides up to her ear. Jeff can hear the low murmur of Mike whispering something, but can’t make out the words. He doesn’t miss, however, the way El blushes, the way her hands clutch Mike just that much tighter, the way she gasps and whimpers. God, he doesn’t even want to know what Mike’s whispering in her ear.

Mike lifts his head and leans in to capture El’s mouth in a kiss that’s almost *indecent* – hot, mouths open against each other’s as they trade heated kisses, hands clutching each other, fingers digging and curling into each other’s skin and clothing.

“Jesus Christ,” Aaron mutters. “They’re practically having sex in the common room.”

Jeff elbows Aaron. “Dude, don’t say that. I don’t wanna hear it.” He kind of agrees with Aaron, though. The way Mike and El are kissing is *not* made for public consumption and it’s kind of nauseating.

Still, though, Jeff can’t help but be a bit envious. The furthest he’s ever gone with a girl is 2nd base spring semester of last year, with a girl he dated for all of two months. And Jeff knows from sharing a wall with Mike that Mike and El have been *way* past 2nd base... numerous times. And, mostly, Jeff just wants to know *how*. Jeff knows he’s not the best looking guy, but he’s not *terrible* looking – medium blond hair just a bit too dull, nose a bit too irregular – and he’s always been something of a nerd, which has made getting girls hard....

But Mike is just as much of a nerd as he is and, though Jeff can see why someone would be attracted to Mike, Mike’s not exactly conventionally attractive, either. So, how in the *hell* did he get a girl like El? Because El is just *stunning*, like one of the most beautiful women Jeff’s ever seen. Did they just grow them different out in Indiana, or something?

After a couple of moments, El manages to pull away. “Mike,” she says

firmly, if breathlessly. “Mike, I need to go. You’ll see me in a few hours, I promise.”

“Oh, I’ll do more than just see you,” Mike says, voice low and filled with seductive intent.

At this, El smiles, lips curling knowingly, and she hums a bit. “Hmm, counting on it,” she says, leaning up for one, last smoldering, lingering kiss, the air between them settling as lust fades into something calmer, deeper. “Love you.”

“Love you, too,” Mike says, softly and sincerely. Smiling, El slips from Mike’s embrace and then she’s out the door.

Mike closes the door to the suite behind her and sighs as he turns. He spots Jeff and Aaron on the couch and blushes a bit. *Good, at least he has the decency to be a bit embarrassed.* “Hey guys,” Mike says as he ambles on over to the couch, sitting in the empty spot on the far end.

“Morning, Wheeler,” Aaron says. “You’re a lucky man, by the way. You do know that, right?”

Mike arches an eyebrow over at Jeff and Aaron. “You mean El?” He grins a split second later. “Yeah, I’m well aware, trust me.”

Tilting his head to one side, Jeff just has to ask. “You guys are pretty intense. How long you two been together, anyway?”

Mike squints a bit, thinking. “Almost 5 years by now, I think.” Jeff’s jaw drops as he does the math a bit and Mike grins. “Yeah, we’ve been dating since middle school.”

“Jesus, Mike,” Jeff says, shaking his head. He’s never heard of anyone dating someone from middle school all the way to college.

“That’s commitment,” Aaron says with a chuckle.

“You must really love her, don’t you?” Jeff asks.

Mike’s grin turns into a soft smile and, for a moment, Jeff’s blown away by the depth of emotion behind the expression. “Yeah, I do. I’m going to marry her someday. I never want to be with anyone else.”

Aaron snorts around a mouthful of cereal. “Well, good thing the sex sounds fantastic, then.”

Jeff feels the hackles rise on the back of his neck as Mike glares a bit. “Excuse me?” Mike says, voice going a bit cold.

“Dude, the entire suite can hear you two,” Aaron says. “Poor Jeff over here gets the worst of it. She sounds like a real firecracker, though. Again, lucky man.”

Jeff closes his eyes for a moment – Aaron sometimes has the ability to shoot his mouth off in inappropriate ways and, given the look on Mike’s face, this is one of those times. “Dude, don’t be crude,” Jeff says turning to look at Aaron before looking back at Mike. “And don’t worry about it, man. Though, if you could be a little quieter, I’d appreciate it.”

The tension diffuses and Mike’s face turns from stony to bashful. “Um, sorry Jeff. We’ll try to be a bit quieter.”

Jeff shrugs. “All I can ask for, really. She’s a great girl, Wheeler. Don’t let her go.”

Mike smiles, a small half grin that pulls up one corner of his mouth (though he’s still glancing at Aaron with cool annoyance). “Not planning on it.”

Winter in Chicago is a whole different beast than winter in Hawkins. Mike cups his hands and blows on his fingers through the fabric of his gloves as he walks down the street and tries not to let the chill in the air get to him. It’s the Thursday before finals week and, despite the sun in the sky shining weakly down on the city, the temperatures haven’t crawled above freezing. And it hasn’t even started *snowing* yet. Mike thought he was pretty good at dealing with the cold, but this is just something else.

And if Mike’s not dealing well with it, El’s just *miserable*. Though, her

way of showing it is one Mike doesn't mind at all. El's way of coping with the cold is to latch onto Mike as tightly as possible in an effort to steal his body heat. Which often (read: *almost always*) ends up leading to activities of a more amorous nature...or, as Mike likes to think of it, an alternative way of producing body heat (El doesn't find that joke nearly as funny as he does).

He wishes he were at the apartment right now – all warm and snug on the couch or under the covers – instead of heading down the street to the café he and El have designated as their meeting spot to study before heading home. He's been tutoring her in calculus and they find they actually get work done when they're away from the apartment and the distractions of either the TV or her bed. And, with finals coming up, they really can't afford to let up on the studying, especially since El's freaking out about her calculus final.

Mike knows she's got this – especially since the calculus she's taking is a much less in depth version than the one *he's* taking as an engineering major and she's almost as good at math as he is – but he can also understand her anxiety about it and if he can help, he's more than happy to do so. And, yeah, calculus is tough. Besides, helping El helps him because he learns a lot through teaching her. So, really, it's a win-win for both of them.

So, after his last class of the day, which ends at 2, Mike makes the drive from Northwestern to El's apartment where he parks his car before walking three blocks to the Windy Café, a cute coffee shop that always has plenty of seating where he and El can spread their books out and drink coffee while they study.

Mike can't help the sigh of relief that rushes out of him as he steps through the front door of the café. *Hey, I'm here*, he says to El with their connection. *You on your way?*

In a few minutes. Class is late getting out. Should be there in 20 minutes?

The way El's mental voice trails off in a question makes Mike smile. *Ok, I'll hold off on ordering your mocha. Let me know when you're close.*

The response Mike gets is nothing more than a feeling of warmth and love, a mental caress that has him sighing with how good it feels,

how warm and loved it make him feels. God, he loves her.

Mike approaches the cash register where one of the baristas is standing, wiping down the counter, and smiles. "Good afternoon."

The barista, a middle-aged woman who goes by Bessie, smiles back. "Why, hello there, Mike. The usual?"

"Yeah, just mine for the moment, though," Mike says. "My partner's running late."

Bessie grins. "That girl of yours," she says with a dramatic shake of her head. "One latte, coming right up, then. That'll be two-fifty."

Mike passes over 3 bucks. "Keep the change," he says.

Bessie nods. "I'll bring this out to your table when it's ready."

Drink ordered, Mike turns and surveys the open tables. There's a handful of the usuals in the café and Mike spots an empty table in the corner. He squeezes past the person sitting at the table next to it – a girl around his age he's seen often enough, usually with her head buried in her textbooks and school notes. "Sorry," he says as he bumps into her table.

She looks up at him, startled with wide eyes, mouth parted in surprise. But, a split second later, she smiles. "No, it's ok. I'm too spread out over here. Totally my fault."

Mike gives her a small smile and slips his backpack off his shoulders as he sits, stripping off his jacket, scarf, and gloves soon after. Situated, Mike then starts pulling school supplies out of his backpack – his calculus textbook, the notes he's taken during class, a couple of pencils. A few moments later, Bessie comes by with Mike's latte and Mike lets himself get lost in reviewing the material for his own final, his brain filling with limits and derivatives.

It goes like this for a little while, Mike drinking his coffee and studying and occasionally reaching out to El to see how close she's getting.

But then the sound of a chair scraping against the floor reaches

Mike's ears as it approaches his table and he looks up to see the girl at the table next to him pushing her chair so that it's next to his at his table. Mike arches an eyebrow, confused. "Hi?"

She smiles and pushes her dark hair over her shoulder with a quick flick of her hand. "Hi. I'm sorry for bothering you, but there's something I been wanting to tell you."

Mike smiles back, but he's still confused so the expression is more polite than anything. "Um, yeah, sure. What is it?"

"I just wanted to let you know that what you're doing for that girl you're always here with is just the sweetest thing. I hope she pays you well."

At this, Mike's brain short circuits. "What?"

"I mean, you're always in here, tutoring her. She's a lucky girl. You're so smart. I've watched you explaining calculus to her and, well, makes me wish all tutors were as cute as you." At this, the girl reaches out and places her hand on his forearm, looking at him through her eyelashes, and it hits Mike what's happening. This girl is *flirting* with him.

What?

And, of course, this is the moment that El walks into the café.

El hugs her coat tightly around her body as she all but runs the last 50 feet to the front door of the café. It's *way* too cold outside for her and El can't wait until later when she can snuggle up with Mike under a blanket or something and just be *warm* again.

The warmth of the café engulfs her and El hurries to shut the door behind her to lock the cold air out. She can see Mike off in the corner...but he's not alone and the sight stops her short.

There's a girl sitting at Mike's table – a pretty girl, with black hair

and fair skin, wearing a tight, cashmere sweater and equally tight jeans. She's got her hand on Mike's arm and is smiling up at him coquettishly.

...And Mike looks like he's about to be run over by a train – eyes wide, shocked, panicked.

El can't help it – she *laughs*.

Making a new friend? El asks teasingly, biting the inside of her cheek to keep from smiling.

El, it's not – she just sat down and – I didn't know and I – just....

El steps up to the counter and gives Bessie a wave. *Calm down, lover boy.* God, she's never going to stop teasing him about this. *What's she saying to you?*

God, I don't even know. There's a pause as Mike gives a weak response to something the girl is saying – El can't make out the words, but she can hear the tone of his voice and it almost makes her laugh out loud again. He sounds like he's thirteen again – voice cracking a bit, unsure and unsettled. *Are you sure you're not mad?*

El doesn't respond for a second as she orders a mocha and a couple of pastries from Bessie. *Not mad,* El says after she's paid. She turns to look at Mike and this girl, who's now stroking Mike's arm. *I trust you, Mike. You can't help who decides to flirt with you and I can tell you didn't ask for it. Besides, you're cute. I'm only surprised someone hasn't tried flirting with you earlier.*

There's another long pause before Mike's voice sounds in her head again. *Help me? I don't know how to get rid of her.*

El lets out a quiet snorting laugh as she waits for her coffee and pastry. *You're a big boy, Mike. You don't need me to fight your battles for you.*

El! Mike whines and she can practically feel him pouting, which just makes her smile all the more.

A minute goes by and Bessie calls out El's order. "Here you go,

darling,” Bessie says. “Need any help?”

El looks down at her order – a mocha in a large mug with a saucer, a chocolate croissant, and a large chocolate chip muffin, each pastry on its own plate. El’s just working through how she can carry this all with two hands so she can respond to Bessie, but Mike’s voice comes from behind her just as El feels his hand press against her back. “I got it,” Mike says.

El turns, smile on her face, ready to tease him about being flirted with, but the second she does, Mike cups her face with his other hand and swiftly leans to capture her lips in a breath-taking kiss, full of heat and love as his mouth slants over hers. El can’t help the whimpering moan that escapes her throat as she kisses him back, just like she can’t help the way her heart leaps into her throat or the way every inch of her tingles with butterflies that alight in her veins, all rushing and soaring warmth. It’s a kiss that’s a declaration of his love and a promise for the future, both short and long term (*evenings in bed, bodies pressed skin to skin, wedding bells, white picket fences, a home and a family*).

And yet, El smiles, amused. *This is your solution?*

Shut up, he says, kissing her harder in response. El shivers as his mouth opens against hers, tongue flicking out to tease her lips, and El temporarily forgets her name, never mind what Mike’s trying to accomplish with this.

A few moments later, Mike pulls away and El’s eyes flutter open as she’s trying to catch her breath, knowing she looks just dazed and blown away – *thoroughly kissed*. Because even though she knows where this is coming from, there’s always going to be a part of her that reacts to Mike’s kisses like it’s the first time.

Mike’s breathing a bit hard, too, but he’s smiling, lips glistening in a way that makes El want to lean up and kiss him again. But she just smiles back as he speaks. “Hi,” he says, voice low and bit dreamy, like nothing else matters, including why he came over to kiss her like this in the first place.

“Hi,” El says, feeling her lips stretch even wider as her smile

threatens to take over her entire face. She turns just enough to look past Mike at the table with the flirting girl. The poor girl is looking back over at them, a crestfallen expression on her face as an embarrassed blush spreads across her skin. “I think you’re new friend got the message.”

Mike leans over and brushes his nose against hers. “Mmm, what new friend?”

El lets out a laugh. “*Mike*,” she chides.

“*El*,” Mike says back, mimicking her tone. He pulls away and reaches for one of the pastries. “C’mon, let’s get some studying in before we go home.”

Home. Home, where they can snuggle under the covers, where she can take him up on the near future the promise of his kiss offered, where she can just be with him in all the ways she wants without a care in the world.

They take their time gathering the pastries and El’s coffee, grabbing napkins and utensil to cut each one in half so they can easily share, and when they make their way the table Mike found earlier, the girl is gone, having moved to a table on the other side of the café. El notices that the other girl resolutely refuses to look in their direction and El has to keep herself from smiling like the cat that ate the canary.

That’s what you get when you flirt with my boyfriend.

Coming home for the holidays is like swimming in an off-the-beaten-path lake on a summer day – calming, soothing, serene.

And this year, there’s something *more* about it. Probably because Mike’s also home after his first semester at college and Karen’s on Happy Wheeler Family overdrive.

Because of this, she’s been insisting on having everyone over for

dinner every night...even if both Mike and Nancy are spending their nights elsewhere (Mike at El's house, Nancy with Jonathan at Steve's apartment).

Which partly explains why Nancy's in the passenger seat of Jon's car as he drives her over to her childhood home. He has his own family dinner to go to tonight and when he drops off Nancy, he'll also pick up El, who's, from what Nancy can understand, been at the Wheeler house all day.

Nancy sighs when Jon pulls up in front of her house. "Right, time to go into the belly of the beast," she says. "You wanna come in and grab El or should I just send her out?"

Jonathan smiles at her and parks the car, killing the engine. "I'll come in, say hi to your mom. Never hurts to stay in everyone's good graces, right? Especially considering."

Nancy feels the familiar swoop tumble in her stomach. Because, in 5 short months, Nancy and Jonathan are moving back to Indiana, to a town halfway between Indianapolis and Hawkins...and Steve is going to move in with them and they're all going to be officially together. Nancy is going to marry both of those boys, the law be damned. *She's faced down interdimensional monsters. She'll figure something out.*

In the meantime, she sees Jon's point. Better to keep on her mom's good side...especially since Nancy's gonna have to come clean about the nature of her relationship with both Steve and Jonathan, never mind their relationship with *each other*.

"Fair point," Nancy says as she climbs out of the car.

Compared to New York, Decembers in Indiana are fairly mild and Nancy only feels the need to wear a mid-weight jacket over her sweater. She waits for Jonathan to come around the car before she links hands with him and they walk to the front door together.

Moments later, Nancy and Jon are inside, the warmth of the foyer surrounding them. "Mom, I'm home!"

"In the kitchen, sweetheart!" Karen calls back and Nancy leads

Jonathan down the hall towards the kitchen.

Karen's in the middle of making dinner and she smiles as she sees the two of them. Nancy notices that the smile on her mom's face is a little too put on, a little too overwhelmed just under the surface. *So concerned with everything being perfect, with holding it all together, not wanting to worry anyone. Doesn't she know it only makes us worry more?*

"Jonathan, I didn't know you were here," Karen says, the warmth in her voice real. "Are you here to pick up El?"

Jonathan gives Karen a wave with his free hand, the one not holding Nancy's. "Hi, Mrs. Wheeler. Yeah, I'm here for El."

Karen clucks her tongue. "Tsk, Jonathan, we've talked about this. You can call me Karen," she says, smile fading to a grin – *a real expression*.

"They down in the basement?" Nancy asks, knowing that wherever El is, her brother's right there with her.

"The family room, actually," Karen says. "They're watching a movie with Holly."

The sight Nancy's imagining warms her heart and Nancy smiles. "I'll go get El, send her out." She squeezes Jon's hand. "I'll see you later, Jon."

Jonathan smiles, leaning over for a quick kiss. "Bye, Nancy."

Nancy slips her hand from Jon's grasp and make her way to the family room, which is dimmed to let the TV shine brighter. And, for a moment, Nancy just leans against the entryway and stares.

The three of them – Mike, El, and Holly – are all on the couch. Mike and El are stretched out along the length of it, spooning. One of his arms is around her, hand half tucked under her shirt to rest on her stomach, while the other props his head up so he can see the TV. Mike's legs are bent, knees forming a triangle with the back of the couch, and this is where Holly's sitting, in the hollow Mike's left for her, her legs dangling over Mike's knees.

Really, it's more adorable than Nancy had been imagining.

Holly's transfixed by the movie – “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” by the sounds of it – but Mike and El are only half paying attention. They're whispering to each other, all soft smiles and gentle touches (her hand on his forearm, his lips on her cheek or her hair, his hand stroking her stomach). Mike leans down and presses a soft kiss to El's neck, which makes her giggle, Mike smiling in response to the sound.

God, those two are just so damn cute. Mike and El have been especially all over each other since they've been home for Christmas, which Nancy is attributing to the two extra days they stayed in Chicago so they could, in El's words, “have the apartment to themselves for a little bit”. Nancy's not a fool, though. She remembers what it was like when she and Jon moved in together freshman year, remembers how they couldn't get enough of each other once they had their own space. And Nancy and Jonathan's relationship is nowhere near as deep and overwhelming as Mike and El's.

So, yeah, Nancy would be surprised if Mike and El were anything *but* naked for the entirety of those two days.

But, as loathe as Nancy is to do it, it's time to break up this little snuggle fest. “You guys look cozy,” Nancy says, announcing her presence.

Holly looks over first, a bright smile on her face. “Mike's a furnace,” Holly says, pronouncing the last word carefully. “He's good at keeping us warm.”

Mike rolls his eyes, but he's grinning so the put-upon look on his face is already ruined. “Always using me for my heat, the both of you.” He looks at his older sister. “Hey, Nance.”

El snickers. “Well, I don't *just* use you for your heat,” she says, eyebrow arching with suggestion.

The laugh that bubbles out of Nancy does so with such suddenness, it makes her cough a bit as she chokes on her own spit to fuel it with air. “Oh, god,” she says, chortling.

Mike waggles his eyebrows, grin now full-blow and shit-eating. “Are you saying you just use me for whatever my body can do for you?”

El’s trying not to laugh, body shaking with the effort. “For me, to me...take your pick.”

Nancy pinches her lips and looks away, trying keep herself under control...

And then Holly looks over, brows furrowed, frowning with a suspicious look on her face. “Is this a sex thing?”

Mike and El’s faces both look shocked – like they forgot Holly was there in all their flirting – and Nancy just *loses* it.

“You’ll understand when you’re older, Holly,” Nancy says through her giggles after a few moments, wiping at her eyes.

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” Mike grumbles, flushing a bit with embarrassment. Which only makes Nancy laugh harder. “Nancy, this isn’t funny!”

“Oh, you started it, baby brother,” Nancy says as she wraps her arms around her torso. God, her sides *hurt*...

“Anyway,” Nancy says, trying to control herself. “El, Jon’s here to take you home for dinner. He’s in the kitchen.”

“Ok,” El says, shifting to sit up, her hand holding onto Mike’s as she moves and stands.

“I’ll see you after dinner,” Mike says, arm outstretched from where El’s holding his hand.

El leans over and gives Mike sweet, lingering kiss (on the other end of the couch, Holly screws up her face and lets out a soft “ew”). “Let me know when you’re heading over. Love you.”

“Love you, too,” Mike says, looking up at her all besotted.

El then gives Nancy a small wave before she slips past and over to the kitchen.

“You two are gross,” Holly says, still frowning.

“Hey, scoot over,” Nancy says as she walks into the family room towards the couch.

Mike frowns as he rearranges his limbs, sitting up in the process so that he’s fully seated on the center cushion. “I thought you liked El, Holly.”

“El’s awesome – cooler than you,” Holly says, snuggling into Mike’s side as Nancy sits down. “But you two are still gross.”

“She’s got a point,” Nancy says as she leans into Mike’s other side. “And, wow, you are a furnace.”

Mike sighs, resigned. “Yes, it is I – Mike Wheeler, the Human Furnace.”

Nancy chuckles. “Isn’t that one of your comic book characters?”

Mike lets out a strangled groan. “That’s the Human Torch, Nancy,” he says, punctuating his words by tickling her side.

Nancy yelps and retaliates by poking Mike in the ribcage, knowing how it makes him squirm. “Whatever, you nerd.”

“Bossy.”

“Geek.”

“Know-it-all.”

“Goober.”

“Mouth breather.”

“Guys, stop!” Holly yells. “I’m trying to watch my movie!”

“Sorry, Holly,” Mike and Nancy say simultaneously, exchanging grins. They settle down, amusement running through both of them, and Nancy rests her head on Mike’s shoulder as she focuses on the TV, watching stop-motion Rudolph run around on the Island for

Misfit Toys, smiling as she feels Mike's cheek against her hair.

The Wheeler siblings are all still cuddled on the couch when Karen comes in to announce dinner. No one asks where Ted is and Nancy tries not to frown. *Third night this week he hasn't been here for dinner.* But she shares a look with Mike, a look that says a thousand things in the way that only siblings can share. They don't miss the way Karen looks occasionally at the empty seat at the head of the table, the way her smile is, once again, a little too bright, and Nancy has only one thought:

Fuck Ted Wheeler.

After dinner, Karen enlists Holly to help with the dishes as part of her chores and Nancy slips upstairs to grab something from the things she dropped off a few days ago. She shucks on her jacket and goes to grab Mike, who's helping clean up the table. "Hey, wanna go for a walk?"

Mike nods. "Yeah, ok. You want a ride to Steve's apartment after?"

"Depends on how well you hold your liquor, little brother," Nancy says with a grin, removing her hand from her pocket to reveal the small flask she packed days ago.

"I sober up pretty quick," Mike says, eyes shining with humor and excitement. "Lemme go grab a jacket." Mike disappears upstairs and, a couple of minutes later, they're walking out back behind the house along the edge of the woods.

Nancy takes a swig from the flask before handing it over, watching as Mike does the same. He only coughs a little as he swallows. "Jesus, Nancy, what is that?" he says, voice hoarse.

"Bourbon," Nancy says. "You like?"

"S'not bad," Mike says. He hands back the flask and stuffs his hands in the pockets of his fleece-lined denim jacket.

Nancy tucks the container back in her pocket. "So, how was your first semester at Northwestern?"

Mike grins. "Good – got all As except for an A-minus in Lit. Still getting used to Chicago, though."

Nancy laughs. "Yeah, it took me a while to get used to New York. Big cities are something else, though, aren't they?"

"Yeah," Mike nods. "Fun, though." He lets out a cough. "I've been thinking about getting a job, though. A classmate told me the library's hiring, so I'm thinking I can do that. He said that you can usually study when you watch the front desk, so that doesn't sound so bad."

Nancy frowns. "Are you hurting for money?"

Mike lets out a small laugh and tilts his head in the way that he does when he's a little bashful about something. "No, I'm not. It's just...."

Nancy leans in and nudges Mike with her elbow. "C'mon, spit it out."

Mike sighs, but he's smiling. "Fine, let's sit first, though," he says, nodding to a fallen log just past the tree line.

They're sitting, the ground cold beneath them, and Nancy pokes Mike. "Ok, spill. What's going on?" She takes out the flask and sips from it before passing it back over to Mike.

"I'm saving up for an engagement ring," Mike says before he drinks.

Nancy blinks and, though she's a little taken aback, she is in *no way* surprised. "How much you got saved up?"

Mike shrugs. "About fifteen hundred."

At that, Nancy lets out a guffaw. "Fifteen hundred? How long have you been saving?"

"Since Hop and Joyce got married."

Mike's words go through Nancy in a rush and she lets out a breath. "Whoa, that's-"

"What, too soon?" Mike says.

Nancy punches Mike in the shoulder as she leans against him, stealing his warmth as the coolness from the ground begins to seep in through her clothes. “No, I was gonna say that’s great. I just didn’t know you’d been saving that long.” Nancy thinks about it for a second and scoffs. “And, please, we’ve all known *forever* that you were going to marry El someday.”

Mike lets out a pleased sound, a small hum that resonates from the back of his throat. “That obvious, huh?”

“The *most* obvious.”

Mike breathes out a laugh. “So, what about you? How’s your last year at Columbia shaking out?”

“Pretty good,” Nancy says with a sigh. “Jon and I are starting the process of job hunting.”

“Oh yeah? You thinking of staying in New York?”

Nancy smiles; they haven’t told anyone this yet, but it’s Mike, so.... “Actually, we’re looking in Indianapolis. I’ve got a pretty good shot at a job at the paper there and Jon’s made some good contacts with some of the freelance photographers.” She pauses, taking in a deep breath. “We’re actually going to be moving in with Steve. In Jesper, do you know it? Small town-”

“Half way between here and Indianapolis,” Mike finishes for her. He takes a drink from the flask. “So you three finally making it official?”

It warms her more than she has words for that Mike’s ok with the relationship between her, Jonathan, and Steve. “Yeah, I think we are. Just to friends and family, though.”

Mike smiles. “That’s great. If you need help with Mom, just let me know. You know Dad’s gonna pitch a fit, though, right?”

Nancy shrugs. “Fuck him,” she says, a little more harshly than necessary.

Mike laughs a bit, humorless. “No argument here.”

Nancy looks over at her brother – *really* looks. In the faint moonlight, there's a stoniness to his face that speaks volumes. It makes him look older than he is, a sneak preview to the man he'll be in about 10-15 years – strong jawed, pronounced cheekbones, powerful lines. The features on his face that had been so feminine hiding behind layers of baby fat – and lending him the bullying nickname of “frogface” – have sharpened into something almost elven, otherworldly. Nancy can see why El's attracted to her brother – there's a mysterious quality to his features that hints at hidden depths.

But the look on his face...Nancy's stomach turns a bit. She was gone for the way their family imploded, saw the fallout only at a distance after Karen skipped town and left Mike behind to find a way forward. She's been away for the increasingly broken relationship between her parents, for the awkward rebuilding of Karen and Mike's, for the rapid loss of Holly's innocence in the middle of all of it.

She talks to Mike at least once every other week – a routine that started after Karen abandoned Mike for that fateful week – but it's not the same as actually being here and Nancy hates that she missed being physically *here* for him through all of it – through the awkward dinners and the therapy sessions and just *everything*. It'll be easier, once she's back in Indiana – easier to visit once they're one state apart, easier to call once they're in the same time zone. And, if Nancy has it her way, she'll be there for the rest of it, for everything.

But, the air between them has gotten too heavy and Nancy can't have this. Not while they're drinking good bourbon. “So, how's El doing at University of Chicago?”

The question brings a smile back to Mike's face and, just like that, he transforms under the faint moonlight, all boyish again as he thinks about his lady love. “Good. She was freaking out about calculus, this last semester, but I managed to help her get through it just fine....”

Everyone's asleep except for El when Mike lets her know he's coming over. It's almost 11 o'clock and, though El wasn't getting worried, she

is *curious*.

Everything ok?

Yeah, Mike answers. Nancy and I were talking and lost track of time. Tell you about it when I get there.

El bundles up and heads downstairs, slipping out to the porch swing to wait. Mike shows up about 10 minutes later and parks just past the driveway so he doesn't block either Hop or Joyce's cars so they can go to work in the morning.

El stands as Mike approaches and goes into his arms as easy as breathing once he's close enough. "Hey," she says, stretching up on her toes to kiss him. She can taste the alcohol on his breath, but it's faint. "Were you drinking?"

"I'm sober, if that's what you're asking," Mike says. "Nancy had a flask with some bourbon in it that she shared."

El grins. "Sounds like fun. Sorry I missed it. Wanna head up to bed?"

"Hmm, sounds good," Mike says. "Anyone still up?"

El takes Mike's hand in hers and pulls him inside. "Nope, just me." She pauses, giggling. "And, now you, too."

Mike rolls his eyes. "Cute," he sighs, but he's smiling a bit.

Their steps are quiet as they head up the stairs, muffled by the carpeting, and soon they're in her room, getting dressed for bed – Mike stripping off his sweater and jeans so that he's just wearing a t-shirt and boxers, El taking off the robe she bundled up in to reveal a tank top and PJ pants. The only light that's on is El's bedside lamp as they crawl under the covers, both of them sighing as they reach for and immediately tangle up in the other.

"S'nice," Mike murmurs, relaxing.

El hums her agreement. "How was dinner?"

El can immediately tell it was the wrong question to ask because the

edges of Mike's face just *tighten* – mouth pinching a bit, eyes narrowing – and he sighs. “Dad wasn't there again. Mom spent half of dinner just *staring* at his empty seat. I don't know why they even bother trying anymore, why they don't just get a divorce and stop pretending.”

El reaches out and presses her palm lightly against Mike's cheek. “Probably for Holly,” she says.

Mike scoffs. “Please, it would be better for Holly if they just owned up to it. It's not like she doesn't know what's going on. It's not fair to keep lying to her about it, though.” Still, Mike leans into her touch, eyes closing for a brief second as he relishes in it.

“I don't know, then,” El says, shrugging. “I guess adults aren't that much smarter than kids, after all.”

Mike lets out a snort. “Please, we've known that for a while.”

“True,” El says. “You ok, though?”

Mike looks down, just barely frowning. “Yeah, just....” He sighs. “Don't let us end up like that, ok? Whatever happens, I don't want us to feel stuck with each other and pretending for the sake of other people.” His voice is so tight with emotion, filled with so much anxiety, that it breaks El's heart.

Most of the time, El and Mike are a perfectly normal, happy couple – more than happy, really – blissfully in love, sickeningly unable to keep their hands to themselves. But, under the surface, there are scars and fears and healed traumas. There are nightmares and sleepless nights, each of them equally offering the comfort the other needs when the past terrorizes their sleep, when the memories are too strong.

Some nights, it's El, with all the horrible things she's faced – the cell in the lab, Brenner's touch on her cheeks, the Demogorgon's slick flesh beneath her fingers, the echo of her scream as she killed it, all the terror and powerlessness she experienced for over a decade.

Some nights, though, it's Mike. Mike and his fear of abandonment.

Mike and his fear of losing her again. Mike and his fear of losing control, losing everything, of not being able to help or keep everyone safe or save anyone.

Tonight, El knows, is going to be one of those nights. And she will do whatever it takes to comfort him.

“We won’t end up like that,” El says, voice soft. “We love each other too much. You’re my everything, Mike Wheeler.”

There’s a telling sheen in Mike’s eyes as he stares at her. “Promise?”

“Promise,” El whispers back, feeling like she’s been punched in the heart. Spurred on by the love she feels for him, El leans in and presses her lips against his in a soft kiss, the palm on his cheek sliding up so she can sift his hair through her fingers.

Mike lets out a needy sound – something between a whimper and a gasp – and he kisses her back, hand gripping her hip, like if he can hold on tight enough, she’ll never leave.

El feels the beginnings of desire bubble in her veins, but it’s tempered by the depth of the emotion that’s washing over her, feeling deeper and more all-encompassing than normal. She rolls over, pulling him with her, letting his weight settle over her as they kiss, his lips getting greedier and greedier with each passing second, El letting him take from her what he needs.

She makes love to him in the soft, warm light of her bedside lamp, giving herself to him freely, taking in everything he is in return, feeling him shudder beneath her touch as he lets himself get lost in her, in what she’s offering, in the love and comfort and togetherness she holds out to him. It’s all quiet gasps and soft caresses, her pleasure cresting like a gentle wave, washing over her like warm honey. His breath tickles against her ear, his soft moans and cries ripple down her spine, and he moves against her like she’s all he needs, all he’ll *ever* need.

Mike stays on top of her after they’re both finished, the warmth of pleasure realized floating through their limbs, and buries his face in the crook of her neck. It’s a little hard to breathe, the weight of him

on top of her, but El doesn't mind as she wraps her arms and legs around him, holding him close, her hands brushing up and down his back in soothing strokes. He lets out a sniffle and that's when El feels it, the telltale wetness of tears against her skin, and she holds him all the tighter.

"I love you," Mike says, breath hitching. "So much."

El feels her lower lip tremble and she blinks away the tears that burn at the corners of her eyes. "Love you, too. Always and forever."

One day, she's going to marry this man. And she's never, *ever* going to let him go.

Chicago is everything Will could have hoped for...except for the cold.

Because, *holy shit*, is it cold.

Will's never been much for the cold. Even as a little kid, he'd been small and keeping warm had never been easy for someone his size. And that was *before* the Mind Flayer (*he likes it cold*). Ever since then, for Will, the warmer, the better. The cold brings back too many horrible memories.

So, yeah, Chicago winters suck with their frigid, sub-zero temperatures and mountains of snow that blow *fucking sideways*.

But everything else about Chicago is just *amazing*.

There's so much to see, so much to try, so many different kinds of people and food and sounds and *everything*. It's overwhelming in the best way possible.

And then there's the Art Institute. Will's never felt so at home in his entire life. Surrounded by artists, leaving and breathing art...it's all he's ever really wanted.

Will spends hours in the Art Institute's galleries, sitting and

sketching, drinking in the priceless works of art. He especially loves the Impressionist exhibit, where he drowns in colors and hazy shapes.

This is to say nothing of his classes. The School of the Art Institute is just amazing. Will was never formally taught anything related to art – his skill self-taught, his talent coming as easy as breathing. Art classes back at Hawkins High had some theory, but it was spread too thin, among too many careless, unappreciative students.

The depth of knowledge at the Art Institute is overwhelming – and going to class excites Will every day, because there's something new he gets to learn or to try or to create and it's just perfect.

There's something else about Chicago, and the Art Institute, that Will also loves: for the first time in his life, there's a *gay scene*. Made up of *multiple people*, all of them out and proud.

There are significant number of LGBT people at the Art Institute (which doesn't surprise Will in the slightest, if he stops and thinks about it hard enough) and he's welcomed into their crowd the second one of them, a sophomore by the name of Thomas, comes up to him in the cafeteria second week of fall semester with a flyer in hand that reads 'Proudly Out: a Club for LGBT' and says, "My Gaydar is never wrong. See you tomorrow at 8PM!"

From that moment, Will finds something that not even the Party could give him: total understanding of the daily struggle of being gay. Not that he doesn't love the rest of the Party with every fiber of his being, but they don't get it, no matter how hard they try. Finding other friends who are also gay has shown Will that some of what he's suffered through is perfectly normal and it's a life lesson that he would wish on none of his best friends.

It's two of these new friends that Will sees upon walking into his Art History class on a Thursday afternoon and he smiles when one of them, a girl name Tami with short brown hair styled in a bob and a tendency for bright, floral patterned fabric, waves him over to where they're sitting a few rows up from the front of the lecture hall.

"Hey Tami, hey Emil," Will says as he sits down. Emil is a slight boy who's even smaller than Will, if that's even possible, with short dark

hair and a crooked smile.

“Hey Will,” Emil says. “Welcome back to Chicago.” It’s the first day of spring semester – why it’s called “spring” when it’s still snowing outside, he’ll never know – and, thus, the first day of class.

“Thanks,” Will says. “How was your break?”

Emil’s family lives in the area, so Emil didn’t have to go far to go home. “Not bad, just hung out, mostly. How about you?”

Tami giggles. “Yeah, how was Farmville?”

Will rolls his eyes. “I knew I would regret telling you I grew up in farm country.”

“You’re just lucky we love you despite your hick ways, Byers,” Tami teases.

Will snorts, but it turns into a laugh. “Thanks, Tami. I really appreciate that.”

Tami grins, her dark brown eyes sparkling. “Any time.”

“Oh, hey,” Emil says. “You wouldn’t have heard yet. Big party going down tomorrow. Grabbed a flyer for you.” Emil fishes in his backpack and pulls out the small piece of paper before handing it over.

Will takes it and looks down at it. “Snow Gays’?” He looks at Emil. “Is this supposed to be clever?”

Emil shrugs. “Dunno. Thomas gave me the fliers. It’s the Proudly Out’s big back-to-school winter party. It’s put on by the upperclassmen and it’s held at some artist’s loft – a former club member, I think. So, you in?”

Will looks at the flyer, full of gorgeously drawn snowflakes, and bites his lip. “Can I bring a couple of friends?”

Tami smiles, a little eager. “Is of them your insanely gorgeous step-sister?”

Will rolls his eyes. “Yeah, and her equally enamored boyfriend.”

Tami shrugs, not at all sorry. “Hey, I can look, can’t I?”

“Yeah, I think it should be ok if you bring them. They’re very obviously together, so no one will mistake them as gay,” Emil says. “Why?”

Will gives a half-hearted shrug. “Just like the moral support, is all.” He chuckles. “Besides, I wanna see if Mike’ll try to be my wingman tomorrow,” he says, remembering back to when he came out to Mike.

Emil arches an eyebrow. “Seriously?”

Will shakes his head. “It’s a long story. But, yeah, I guess I’m in.”

Tami lets out a small squee, hands clasped together. “Oh, this is gonna be *fun*.”

Later, after Will’s classes are over for the day, he’s back at the apartment. He can hear the TV through the door as he unlocks it with his key and Will fights the urge to roll his eyes.

Mike and El are on the couch, huddled under a blanket, him laying against the arm, her leaning back against his chest. Both of them only have morning classes, with Max and Will having class through the afternoon, which means they have the apartment to themselves all afternoon.

Which means the odds of walking in on them naked are high.

“Please tell me you’re wearing pants,” Will says. “It’s all I ask of you.”

El sticks out her tongue as she shakes her leg out from under the blanket, revealing purple, flannel PJ pants. “I’m wearing pants.”

“Fantastic,” Will sighs as he drops his backpack by the front door. He shucks off his winter clothes as he makes his way to the couch. “Scooch over a bit, you two.” Will can see Mike and El moving their feet through the blanket and he pulls the fabric aside so he can burrow under it, too, the air under the blanket warm from their combined body heat. “What are we watching?”

“M*A*S*H,” El says. “It’s on commercial right now.”

“Oh, I like this show,” Will says, settling in, sighing with contentment at the warmth that surrounds him.

“How was class?” Mike asks, gaze flicking over to him for a brief second.

“Good, first day of the semester, and all that.” Will gulps and reaches into his back pocket. “Hey, I have a favor to ask of you guys.”

Both Mike and El turn to look at him, curious worry in their eyes. It’s intense, having both of them look at him like that, but intense in the best way. “Yeah, what is it?” El asks.

Will passes over the flyer for the party tomorrow night. “Got this today from one of my LGBT friends. Asked if I could bring you two for moral support. What do you say, you in?”

Mike grins. “Does this mean I can finally be your wingman?”

Will groans even as he’s laughing. “God, I knew you were gonna say that. *No*, Mike. *No*, you cannot.”

Mike pouts. “Fine, see if I ever offer you my wingman services again.”

At this, El snorts, lightly hitting Mike in the chest with the back of her hand. “I think Will’ll survive.” She focuses back on Will, smiling softly. “You want us to go? Is it ok for you to bring us?”

“Doesn’t hurt to ask. Worse they can say is ‘no’ when we get to the door,” Will says. “And, yeah, I want you to come with me. Like I said, I could use the moral support.”

Mike shrugs. “Yeah, of course we’ll go, if you want us to.”

“Might be fun,” El says.

Will grins. “Think of it this way. You have every reason to be all over each other at this party, just so people know you’re not gay.”

El tilts her head to one side, brow furrowed with worry. “Won’t that be rude?”

Will guffaws. “One, that’s never stopped you before. And, two, it’s better not to get peoples’ hopes up, just in case. So, yeah, you have carte blanche to be as disgusting as you want, as long as you don’t actually have sex in front of other people. That’s just public indecency.”

Mike nudges El, a silly grin on his face. “Will you wear something hot?”

El rolls her eyes and tilts her head back against Mike’s chest so she can look up at him. “*Please*. Like I’ve said before, I could be wearing a potato sack, and you’d still think I was hot.”

Mike tilts his head and quirks his eyebrow, shrugging. “Well, you got me there.”

Will just shakes his head, even though he’s smiling. “God, you two are ridiculous. Remind me, why do I love you two again?”

“Hey, watch it,” El says, reaching out to jab him in the thigh with her foot. “Remember, we know all your dirty secrets. Just in case you end up bringing a guy home.”

“I highly doubt that’s going to happen tomorrow,” Will says with a sigh. “But thanks for keeping the dream alive, El.”

Only, something does happen at the party.

Sure, Will doesn’t bring a guy home...

...but he sure does meet someone.

The party is a strange affair. The artist's loft is in an old, brick building and the whole interior is very industrial feeling. It's essentially one large open room, full of pounding music, bright alcohol, and hot bodies. Off in one of the back corners, a group is huddled around a table, pristine lines of white powder drawn across the surface. In another, a different group passes around a handful of joints, smoke filling the air.

As promised, Mike and El show up with Will, and none of them are turned away. All of them are dressed up for a night out, Mike and Will in nice jeans and button downs, El in a pair of tight, acid-washed jeans and a sweater that dips dangerously low in the front *and* the back, her hair wild and mussed, make up more dramatic than usual – sharp kohl around her eyes, shimmering lip gloss that Will knows Mike will be half wearing by the end of the night.

They each grab a drink and Will guides them through to find his friends, some of them Mike and El know (like Tami) and others they don't (like Thomas, who immediately and *openly* checks Mike out and pouts a bit, completely not serious and 100% overdramatic, when he realizes that Mike is both straight and taken).

And then...time kind of gets away from them.

Will gets separated from Mike and El (though he spots them on one of the couches against one of the walls a while later, El draped over Mike as they make out without a care in the world, his hands in her hair, her knees on either side of his thighs, completely oblivious to the party going on around them), but he sticks with his other friends, spending the time dancing, drinking, laughing....

Eventually, the small group ends up along one of the walls, as far away from the music as possible, needing to shout a bit to talk to each other.

"...all I'm saying is that it's a cinematic masterpiece. Doesn't mean the plot's not shit, though!" a girl named Brigitte all but yells.

"Yeah, but, can a movie *be* a masterpiece of the plot's shitty?" Emil yells back.

Will watches the back and forth, not entirely sure what movie they're all discussing – some art house film with an Italian sounding title – and he looks down at his cup, which once held beer and now is sadly empty. “Hey, I’m going to go get a refill. Anyone want anything?” After a bunch of head shaking accompanied by a shouted chorus of “no thanks”, Will heads off to where the bar’s been set up.

There’s a lot of bodies packed in a small space and Will fights to push through. Luckily, he has no personal space issues, so Will ducks and squeezes and slips through the press of humanity around him without an ounce of panic.

Still, Will breathes a sigh of relief as he makes it past the sea of people and to the bar. There’s a few more minutes while he waits behind the small crowd, but, eventually, Will gets his beer.

But he doesn’t have it for long.

Will maybe makes it a third of the way back to his friends when someone bumps into him *hard* and sends him tripping over his own feet, tossing his beer out of his hands-

-to splash all over someone else’s back.

Will’s torn between being pissed at the person who bumped into him and embarrassedly apologetic to the person who he just spilled his beer all over. But the person who bumped into him is nowhere to be seen, and the person who Will just spilled all over starts turning around, pushing Will firmly into the embarrassed and apologetic category. “Oh my god, I’m so sorry,” Will says as the person – a guy, tall, sandy blond hair – turns around. “Someone bumped into me and I-”

The guy turns around all the way and Will’s jaw just *drops*.

Holy shit, he’s gorgeous.

Strong jaw, aquiline nose, smooth brow...it’s too dark to tell what color his eyes are, but Will likes to imagine they’re green-

(he’ll be close – hazel)

-and just the most kissable lips Will's ever seen. He's tall (not quite as tall as Mike, which is Will's barometer for tallness, but this guy is definitely over 6 feet) and Will has to look up to look at his face.

Well, fuck. Great job, Byers. The first guy you're attracted to in Chicago and you just spilled your beer all over him. Go fucking figure.

The guy grimaces, but there's a grin stretching his lips. "Hey, no, it's ok." He pauses. "Well, not *ok*. But, I can tell you didn't mean it. So, in the long run, no harm, no foul."

Will frowns, furrowed brow and pinched lips, trying so hard not to kick himself. "But, I just spilled beer all over your back and ruined your shirt." And it's a nice shirt, too – a soft, cream colored t-shirt that's snug around his biceps and just hugs the lines of his torso in the best ways possible.

The guy shrugs. "It's just a shirt. No big. I'll go clean off in the bathroom. Are you alright, though? You said someone bumped into you?"

Will can feel the blush crawl up his cheeks. He bumped into this guy and this guy is concerned about *him*? *Un-fucking-real*. "Oh, uh, yeah. You know, drunk people, crowds," Will stammers.

The guy grins. "Yeah, it's kind of a madhouse in here."

The discomfort is too much for Will and he's eager for an exit, despite the fact that he never wants to look anywhere but this guy's face for the rest of his life. "Yeah," Will says, letting out a laugh. "So, anyway, I'm sorry. I'm just gonna...go. Sorry."

And with that, Will fucking *beelines* away, not even waiting for a reply, his entire body flushing with embarrassment and regret and just *all the fucking luck*.

He doesn't go back to his friends. Instead, he goes to find Mike and El, who are still on the same couch he saw them on earlier, but they're no longer making out. Instead, El's still draped across Mike, but she's snuggling up against him, Mike's arms around her as they just *exist* despite the chaos around them. Will goes up and stops just

in front of them. “Hey, guys.”

Both of them look up at him, wide-eyed and concerned. “Hey, Will,” El says, loud enough to be heard over the music. “Everything ok?”

Shame worms its way deeper into Will’s belly and he shrugs. “I don’t know,” he says. “Just...can we go home?”

He watches as Mike and El share a look, heavy with meaning and unspoken words, before Mike nods. “Yeah, ok. Let’s get out of here.”

The relief that rushes through Will is almost as embarrassing as spilling his beer on the cutest guy known to man. But, still, he smiles. “Thanks, guys,” Will says, happy to be leaving, happy to not have to be embarrassed in front of the cutest man he’s ever seen.

Hell, with any luck, he’ll never see this guy ever again, despite how cute he is.

Too bad Will’s luck doesn’t work that way.

It’s the Monday after the party and Will’s sitting in the cafeteria eating lunch – college cafeteria food is so much better than high school cafeteria food, *oh my god*. He’s got his sketchbook out and is alternating between taking bites of ziti pasta and drawing – he’s not sketching in particular, just using it as an outlet for his feelings, all vague shapes and a sense of place, more than anything.

“Oh, hey, there you are. I *knew* I’d seen you around somewhere.”

Will is so involved in what he’s doing, that he completely fails to notice someone approaching. And, when he hears the voice, right in front of him, he freezes. *I recognize that voice....* Will looks up and his eyes widen. *Oh*.

It’s the guy from the party. The one he spilled beer on. His beautiful embarrassment. “Uh....”

The guy smiles, holding a tray that has a salad and half sandwich on it. "Mind if I join you?"

Will draws in a deep breath, pinching his lips together for a brief moment, and nods. "Yeah, sure, ok. If you want. I mean, no one's sitting there, so...it's empty. Go for it." Great, he's approaching Mike Wheeler Rambling territory. Because *that's* attractive....

The guy laughs, deep and resonant, and Will feels his heart skip a beat in his chest. "Thanks." There's a bit of shuffling as Will moves some of his things so the guy can put his stuff down as he sits. "So, you ran away so fast on Friday, that I didn't get a chance to get your name." He holds out his hand – large palm, strong fingers, flecks of clay and paint in the grooves of his skin. "I'm Greg, Greg Kinney."

Will takes his hand, shaking it, hoping that he's not trembling or that his palm is sweaty. "Will Byers."

The guy – Greg – grins, and that beat that Will's heart skipped reappears in his stomach, setting it swooping with butterflies. "Nice to meet you, Will Byers." Greg glances down at the sketchbook, still open to Will's latest abstract etching, and the grin softens into a smile. "Painting and Drawing?"

"Yeah, first year," Will says, pleased that Greg so accurately guessed Will's specialization. "What about you?"

"Sculpture, junior," Greg says, hazel eyes flicking up to Will before looking back down at the sketchbook. "May I?"

As any artist knows, sketchbooks can be very private and personal and Will loves that Greg thinks to ask before just *grabbing*. Also, he's glad he hadn't had the opportunity to sketch Greg from memory. Because *that* would be awkward. "Yeah, go for it," Will says, voice shaking a bit.

Greg reaches for the book and Will watches, breathlessly, as Greg flips the sketchbook back over to the first page and begins turning slowly through the drawings. It only takes about 4 or 5 page turns before Greg speaks. "Wow, you're *really* good."

Will blushes. “No, I’m not *really*. There are so many better-”

“No,” Greg says, voice soft, cutting Will off. “I’m serious. These are amazing. You’re incredibly talented.” Will looks at the page Greg is looking at and shivers – a drawing based off the memory of the Mind Flayer invading his body (*the rush of wind, the dark clouds swirling around him, the sick feeling of evil crawling under his skin, overpowering him*).

Still, Will smiles a bit. “Thanks.” Taking in a deep breath, Will screws up the courage. “Too bad sculptors don’t have a sketchbook they carry around with them.”

Greg pushes the sketchbook back towards Will and lets out a laugh. “I mean, I do sketches before as prep, sometimes, but I get what you mean.” He leans back, arms crossing over his chest. “I could show you my work sometime, if you wanted. Most of it gets destroyed after the project is graded, but I have some pieces scattered around various places.” Greg uncrosses his arms and grabs his fork to take a bite of his salad, casually shrugging as he lifts the fork to his mouth. “That is, if you wanted to sometime.”

It’s so subtle that Will almost misses it. But Will Byers grew up learning how to read subtleties, that it’s practically his second language by now. And, if he’s not mistaken, it sounds like Greg is asking him on a *date*.

For a moment, Will can’t breathe. He’s never been asked on a date before. Hell, he’s never *been* on a date before. His heart leaps into his throat and Will has to struggle to keep calm.

“Yeah, sure, I’d like that. I’m sure your work is fantastic, too,” Will says, hoping that came across a lot more confident than he’s currently feeling.

Greg smiles and, again, Will feels like he’s going to fly apart in a cloud of happy, floaty molecules. “Great. I’ll get your number before I leave so we can arrange a time to meet up.” Then Greg winks and Will feels like he’s going to melt instead. “So, tell me about yourself, Mr. Byers. What makes you tick?”

Flattered and excited, Will finds the words just spilling from his mouth – telling Greg about Hawkins and his friends and his step-sister and his hopes and dreams (he doesn't mention the Upside Down, not yet, not to a stranger even if he is gorgeous).

In return, Greg tells him about growing up in New York, about discovering his love of clay, of sculpting, about his three younger sisters who are still back in New York.

Will barely tastes the rest of his food as he and Greg talk and Will wonders if this is how it's always supposed to be. *God*, he hopes so.

After the shortest hour of Will's life, he and Greg part ways, Will's phone number written on a spare corner of paper Will tore off from his sketch book. And Will hopes against hope that he hears from Greg sooner rather than later, but he knows how these things go – he probably won't hear for a few days if he hears *at all*.

Which makes the phone call he gets the next day all the more surprising.

It's Max who answers the phone as the apartment's three occupants lounge on the couch, watching "Working Girl", which they rented from the Blockbuster down the street (one of the bonuses of being 18 is being able to rent R-rated movies and one of the other bonuses to watching movies with just El and Max is the three of them can ogle the cute actors in them to their hearts' content).

When the phone rings, El nudges Max with her foot, barely moving the rest of her in the process. "You answer it."

"Why do I have to answer it?" Max asks with a scowl. "You have super powers, *you* answer it."

El shrugs. "Phone doesn't stretch that far and you're closer."

Will rolls his eyes and laughs as Max stands up to answer the phone, grumbling. "She got you there, Mayfield."

"Yeah, yeah," Max mumbles as she picks up the receiver. "Hello?" There's a brief pause. "Yeah, he's here. Hold on." Max pulls the receiver away from her ear. "Will, it's for you. Some guy from

school?"

For a brief few seconds, Will doesn't think anything of it – lots of his friends have his phone number, so it could be any number of them calling. But when Will presses the receiver to his ear after taking it from Max and says "Hello?", the voice that answers back sets off that cascade of butterflies all over again.

"Well, if it isn't the talented Mr. Byers."

Will's breath catches in his throat and he knows the noise didn't go unheard by his roommates as he can *feel* them watching him. "Greg, hi. Um, what's up?"

"You sound surprised, Will," Greg says.

"Yeah, uh, sorry. Just...wasn't expecting you to call." A brief pause. "It's good, though, that you did."

"Oh, good. That's good," Greg says, sounding a little...nervous? "So, I wanted to set up a time for what we talked about. Me showing you my work? You still up for that?"

The way Will's lips are stretched in a smile is so broad, Will wouldn't be surprised if his smile was permanently affixed to his face, like a love-sick Joker, or something. "Yeah, I'm still up for that. Whenever, really. My schedule's pretty open." God, could he sound more desperate?

Greg laughs and Will wants to memorize that sound. "Great! How about Friday? We can meet up on campus at, like, 5. And then, after, we can grab something to eat, if you want. I mean, you still owe me for spilling your beer all over me."

Will's blushing, he just knows he is. Because this is so a date. And he can't stop smiling. "Yeah, sounds perfect."

There's a bit more back and forth about where to meet up and then Greg's telling him, "Alright, see you Friday. Can't wait."

Will feels faint as he responds. "Bye." He hangs up the phone, knowing he probably looks overwhelmed in the best possible way,

and turns back to look at the couch. El and Max are looking at him with intensely curious gazes, rapt with attention, and Will smiles. “I have a date on Friday.”

Max snorts, but she’s smiling. “No shit, Sherlock. I figured from the way you were blushing like El whenever she talks about Mike.”

“Hey!” El says, torn between looking offended at Max’s comment and looking happy for Will. She chooses the latter. “So, tell me *everything* about him.”

And so Will finds himself telling Max and El everything he knows about Greg, which isn’t much, but Max and El hang on his every word, anyway.

On Friday, they help him get ready for his date, picking an appropriate outfit that strikes a fine balance, just in case it’s *not* a date (it totally is, though, but it never hurts to cover all the bases) – a pair of nice jeans and a soft, moss green sweater that make him look fantastic. Max helps with his hair, El with his shoes, and then Will’s out the door, bundled in his winter coat, praying to any and every higher power that’s willing to listen that tonight goes great.

It does.

Greg is *amazing*. His artwork is scattered around several places – the studio where he works, the student gallery at the institute, a couple of galleries across Chicago, and (Will gulps) his apartment. For a moment, Will thinks it might be a ploy to seduce him (which Will wouldn’t mind, like, *at all*).

But Greg is a perfect gentleman and, after showing Will the art at his apartment, he takes Will to a cute tapas place a few blocks away, where Greg shares his sangria that Will’s not legally old enough to order and they share order after order of small plates as they talk and laugh and flirt. Every so often, Greg touches him – on the forearm, Will’s bicep, his shoulder – and Will can’t hide the way he shivers when it happens. It’s not overtly sexual, or anything. It’s just...nice to be touched this way, nice to be treated like he’s special.

It’s nice to be wooed.

At the end of the evening, Greg offers to escort Will back to his apartment, riding the L with him and everything. At first, Will thinks it's just Greg being polite. But there's a look in Greg's eyes – an eagerness, a surprised hopefulness – that has Will thinking that Greg doesn't want this night to be over, either.

And, as Greg's walking Will down his street – Will can just see the stoop to his building half a block away – Greg turns to him and smiles softly. "I've had a really good time tonight, Will."

Will smiles back, feeling all giddy inside. "I did, too. Thanks for inviting me."

"Thanks for saying yes," Greg says.

Will sighs as they get to his front steps. "Well, this is my stop." Will turns, his back to the front door, to look up at Greg. "Thanks for walking me home."

Greg lets out a laugh. "Hey, my mom raised me to be a gentleman." Greg looks down at the ground for a brief second, taking a deep breath, before he looks back at Will. "I'm going to kiss you now, if that's ok with you."

Will's breath sticks in his throat and he can't formulate words. He can only nod, his heart pounding in his chest. *God, is this really happening?*

Every inch of Will's skin buzzes as Greg takes Will's face in his hands, palms gently cupping his cheeks, tips of his fingers pressed against Will's neck. And, swear to god, Will's eyes flutter shut as Greg leans in, breath fanning against Will's cheeks before their lips connect.

It's a soft kiss – warm lips, gentle pressure, long and lingering and all-encompassing. Will explodes in a flurry of fireworks and butterflies, nerves singing, soul soaring. It's good – so, so good. And maybe, just maybe, Will thinks with the distant corner of his brain that's still working, this is how El feels when Mike kisses her.

It's a kiss that lasts forever and is over in a blink. Greg pulls back, still holding Will's face in his hands, and smiles. Will notices the gentle flush on Greg's face, illuminated by the streetlamp above, and

thinks that maybe Greg was just as affected by the kiss as he was.

“Good night, Will,” Greg says, voice gone husky, low and soft in the way that makes Will shiver and want to invite Greg inside.

But, instead, Will just sighs. “Good night, Greg.”

With that, Will turns to go inside, Greg watching him the entire way. The trip upstairs is done in a daze and, when Will gets inside the apartment, the rest of the Party is there, all eyes on him, eager curiosity on their faces.

“So, how was it?” El asks, hope sparkling in her voice.

Will can’t help himself – he fucking giggles. “It was amazing, Ellie. Just amazing.”

(it may be their first date, but it’s nowhere near their last. the next day, greg calls again, asking will if he wants to go to the movies later that same night. and then again, on monday, to have dinner – just dinner, where greg picks him up at the apartment and brings a single flower and it’s everything will ever could have hoped for. will falls in love, slowly and all at once, with the boy with powerful hands and a bright smile and he hopes he’ll always feel this way, with the boy who falls in love with him in return.)

*and, 24 years later, in the state of illinois, will legally marries that boy, their families all around them. and he will always, **always**, be glad he spilled that beer that night.)*

One of the shitty things about college compared to high school is that there’s no A/V club.

But, on the bright side, there’s *Robotics*.

So, naturally, Mike, Dustin, and Lucas all join – Dustin and Lucas bringing their mechanical engineering skills, and Mike with his electrical engineering abilities.

And it's fun – *a lot* of fun. It's all very hands on and just so *techie*, that of course the three of them have a blast.

They also make a ton of friends from all different years, all of them brought together by their geeky love of programmable machinery.

It's in the Robotics lab where Mike's working one day – trying to program a servo – when one of the other club members – Robbie – comes up to him. “Hey, Mike, how's it going?”

Mike grimaces and looks over at Robbie. “Frustrating. But I'll figure it out. What's up?”

“Wanted to see if you, and Dustin and Lucas by extension, had heard about the St. Patrick's Day party at Theta Tau this weekend,” Robbie says, blue eyes sparking with happy eagerness.

Mike shakes his head. “First I've heard of it. Theta Tau's the engineering frat, right?”

“Yep. Surprised you haven't joined yet.”

Mike shrugs. “I have my own band of brothers, thanks,” he says with a grin. “I don't need to go adding a second one to the mix.”

Robbie rolls his eyes. “Man, you and that friends group of yours. Thick as thieves.” He shrugs. “Anyway, wanted to extend the invite. Almost all of the Robotics club is going.”

“Can I bring my girlfriend?” Mike asks.

Robbie looks confused. “Wait, you have a girlfriend?”

This is the moment, of course, that Dustin walks by, arms loaded with metal bracers. Dustin lets out the most inelegant snort Mike's ever heard. “Oh my *god*, how have you never heard about El? Boy won't fucking shut up about her.”

Mike glares at Dustin, but there's no real heat. “Hey, she's your friend, too, you know.”

Dustin grins. “I know, which is why I'm ok with you never shutting

up about her.” Dustin drops the metal bracers onto a table and pulls out his wallet. “Here, I got a picture of the Party. Hold on, I’ll show you.” Dustin pulls out a folded picture – from graduation, Mike can tell from the swaths of navy he can see. “Here, that’s El,” Dustin says pointing.

Robbie lets out a low whistle. “Damn, Wheeler. *That’s* your girlfriend?”

Is it wrong to feel a little bit of pride, to show off a little? Mike really hopes it’s not. Because he fucking *grins*. “Yep. Been dating for over 5 years now.”

Dustin laughs. “Would have been over 6 if you had your way.”

There’s a brief, complicated flash of emotions that surfaces in Mike’s chest – memory of missing El for the year she was gone, the sorrow, the hope, the joy at reuniting with her – but he pushes it aside and smiles. “Hey, I refuse to be embarrassed about how much I love her, ok?”

Robbie watches the back and forth and just shakes his head. “Yeah, you can bring your girlfriend. And any other of your friends, too, while we’re at it. It’s a party, right? The more, the merrier.”

It’s a Tuesday when Robbie asks and St. Patrick’s Day is on the following Saturday. And, from what Mike can gather, it’s a big fucking deal in Chicago – they even turn the river green and everything.

So, yeah, of course the Party is going to go to a big St. Patrick’s Day bash.

The Theta Tau house is just off campus at Northwestern and El, Max, and Will meet at the suite so they can all head over together.

“You look good, by the way,” Mike says, grinning down at El as they walk hand in hand. And she does, she really does. Her hair is loose, all wavy, luxurious curls, and she’s wearing tight, dark blue jeans and a forest green halter top that’s knotted behind her neck, the neckline cut in such a way that’s entirely too distracting, a thin jacket of her

shoulders to ward off the mild chill of the beginning of spring.

El smiles up at him, blushing lightly. “Thank you,” she says, and the two of them stop walking for a brief moment so she can rise up and kiss him.

For a moment, Mike lets himself fall into the kiss, her lips electric against his, and there’s a part of him that can just stay here forever, kissing her like this – her palm warm against his cheek, her mouth soft and inviting, *so alluring*, against his. *God, he loves her.*

“Alright, enough of that!” Dustin exclaims. “Let me have a few beers first before you start making out in public, ok? *God.*”

Slowly, Mike and El separate, ending the kiss, but they’re still holding hands as they resume walking, neither of them apologizing for getting distracted by kissing each other. That’s a battle they conceded a long time ago.

They get to the Theta Tau house, the party already well underway and, after a couple of hours, Mike realizes something. It doesn’t matter what kind of fraternity it is, all frat parties are essentially the same – loud music, dancing, tons of alcohol, and people making out and having sex in every empty room and dark corner.

Everyone kind of goes their separate ways. Will and Dustin go off to play beer pong, Max and Lucas join the dance floor, Mike settles in with some of his Robotics friends, all of them drinking beer, and El spends most of her time with him, but she also floats around between beer pong and dancing, slipping between the crowd of people with ease, sometimes (Mike’s sure) using her powers to gently nudge people aside so she can get through.

Mike’s not terribly worried about her – one, she has super powers and can take care of herself and, two, they have a mental connection that allows him to feel what she’s feeling, hear what she’s thinking, and know where she is at all times. Plus, he knows she’s 100% in love with him, just like he’s completely head over heels in love with her.

At some point in the evening, Mike hears El’s mental giggle in his

head. *Having fun?* Mike asks, corners of his mouth barely turning up in a smile.

You should come out on the dance floor, El says, mental voice all teasing amusement.

Mike fights the urge to shake his head. *Nuh-uh, no way. You couldn't pay me enough money.*

He can practically feel her mental pout. *Fine.* A pause. *Hey, I'm heading back your way. Want me to grab you another drink?*

Sure, sounds good.

Mike focuses back on the conversation going on around him, something about Star Wars vs Star Trek that Mike refuses to get involved in – he's feeling too relaxed after the 4 beers he's had and doesn't feel the need to argue his point (though Star Wars is undeniably better). He gets so wrapped up in listening that he doesn't realize it's been a while since he's heard from El until one of his friends taps him on the shoulder – Daniel, a sophomore with cropped black hair and equally dark skin.

"Hey," Daniel says. "Isn't that your girlfriend?"

Eyebrows raising in curiosity, Mike turns around to see where Daniel is looking. And, yes, it is indeed El.

And she's talking with a very handsome older guy, who's wearing a tight t-shirt which shows off his muscular form and is leaning over her looking all suave in ways that Mike has never been able to achieve. El's smiling up at him as they talk, looking all pretty and polite.

"Man, I can't believe that douche is flirting with your girlfriend. And she's into it," Daniel says.

"That sucks," Robbie says. "You gonna do something about it, Mike?"

Mike just laughs. "Nah, she's not into it. You can totally tell from how she's standing." He shrugs. "And, besides, I trust her *and* she can handle herself." Though he is getting annoyed at this guy who's very

openly flirting with El. He gets it, he really does – El's fucking *gorgeous* – but the way some of these guys treat her, like she's a piece of meat or there for their amusement and/or needs is just frustrating and unbelievable all at the same time. It always makes him wonder how other girls who *don't* have super powers deal with guys like that.

Mike has a feeling El's reaching the limits of her patience, based off the set of her shoulders and the chilliness of her smile, the way it doesn't reach her eyes.

You ok over there? Mike asks, reaching out for her through their connection.

El responds with a huffed sigh. *Guy won't take no for an answer. I'm just waiting for an opening of some sort.*

Mike fights the urge to roll his eyes. *Well, if you need me, just let me know.*

Oh, I always need you, El says, mental voice coy and teasing. *But I can handle one mouth breather all by myself.*

Well, Mike says, breathing out a laugh. *Just holler if you do manage to need me for something other than my body.*

El's mental giggle rolls through his mind and Mike watches, curious, as she focuses back the guy in front of her.

Mike can sense El's about to do something – excuse herself, slip away, *something* – when the guy leans in and grabs her ass, completely unprompted.

Anger, chillingly hot, roils in Mike's stomach, shock following in its wake, stealing his breath. *Holy shit.* And Mike just *knows*, that the emotions aren't entirely his own. Because El is broadcasting *everything* and Mike's suddenly a little bit terrified, even as he freezes in place for half a second.

And, just when Mike's about to move – *because no one fucking touches his girlfriend without her permission* – El *pushes*, hands on the guy's chest as she shoves him away, aided by her powers. And, before anyone can do anything else, El balls up her fist and punches the guy

square in the face, just like Hop taught her. And if that punch has some of her powers behind it, no one can tell.

The air around them goes still as everyone turns to look, the music still sounding around them. The guy's holding his nose, blood leaking from under his fingers, and Mike's never seen El look so angry. Righteous fury surrounds her like a halo and, as terrifying as it is, as angry as Mike is at this guy who just touches girls without asking when they clearly don't want it, Mike can't help but think El looks pretty hot in this moment – all flushed cheeks and fiery eyes and stubbornly set mouth.

And, as Mike continues to watch, El grabs the two beers she'd been bringing over from earlier and beelines it over to him.

She puts the beers down on the table next to him before she grabs Mike and kisses him. She kisses him like she wants to broadcast it to the world, completely and undeniably, that she's with *him* and him alone. There's anger in the kiss, anger and frustration and apology – *sorry he touched me, sorry I couldn't stop him in time* – and Mike kisses her back, accepting it all, giving her what she wants. Which, in this moment, is unbridled passion, all staking of territory and overwhelming love and *she's mine because she chooses to be*.

She's standing, leaning down while she kisses him as he's still sitting, and it's novel, being kissed this passionately from this angle. Her hands dive into his hair while his go to her hips, holding her close, fingers creeping beneath the hem of her halter top.

The kiss changes moments later as they get caught up in it, the immediacy of the moment fading as the overpowering love and desire they share begin to take over. And, just before Mike can pull her into his lap, El breaks the kiss, looking down at him with wide-eyes, pupils blown, cheeks flushed now more from desire than anger (though that's still there, still rippling through her).

People are watching, but Mike doesn't care. Not when she leans down and begins whispering in his ear – *how much she needs him, what she wants him to do to her, what she wants to do to him* – and Mike shudders, unable to stop it from happening. He knows part of this is her trying to push past what just happened (*overcompensation*,

his brain whispers). But part of it is also because she wants him and he wants her, just like she loves him and he loves her, and it's all tangled together in an overwhelming mass of emotion and feeling that feels like it'll never be enough and too much all at the same time.

And then he's standing up in a rush. "Guys, I gotta go," he says to the new friends who are watching him with shocked faces and slacked jaws.

But he only has eyes for El and he takes her hand in his, leading her from the frat house, the groping douche canoe all but forgotten.

They make it to his dorm room – the suite thankfully empty – and tumble into bed, hands frantically touching and undressing and caressing, lips pressing against every inch of exposed skin, all gasps and cries and earth-shattering intensity, love throughout every frenzied moment as he gives her what she needs - *hard, hot, fast, passion and fire, insatiable.*

It's only after, the pounding of his heart just beginning slow, sweat cooling against his skin, that Mike feels El trembling against him. Mike doesn't hesitate as he shifts so he can pull her into his arms, both of them lying on their sides, his hand going to her hair to cradle her head close to him. He can feel her harsh breathing against the bare skin of his chest and he holds her all the tighter. "Hey, it's ok," he says, low and soothing. "I'm sorry." Mike's not apologizing for anything he did. No, he's apologizing because what happened to her should never have happened.

El's not crying, but it's a near thing as she lets out a shaky sigh. "Guys suck, Mike."

Mike breathes out a humorless laugh. "Yeah, we're pretty horrible as a whole."

"Not you, though. You're great," El says, hugging him tight, arms wrapping around his torso.

"I am sorry, though, that you have to put up with this shit. That there are guys who don't know how to take no for an answer. I wish you

never had to deal with that.”

“Me, too,” El sighs. She lifts her head so she can look at him, her expression soft in the dim lighting of the room. “I love you. Never stop being who you are, Mike Wheeler.”

Mike smiles and lifts a hand to tuck her hair behind her ear. “I love you, too.”

El smiles and snuggles against him, shifting a bit. “You really do need a bigger bed, though.”

Mike snorts. “Hey, let me move in with you and we won’t have to worry about this anymore.”

“After freshman year, Mike. You’ve already paid for this room.”

“Ugh, *fine*,” Mike sighs. “Just as long as I get to live with you after I get kicked out of the dorms in May. That’s all I want.”

El presses a soft kiss against his chest. “Of course you can live with me, silly. Where else would you go?”

“Hmm, fair point,” Mike says. He can feel sleep beginning to take over and he curls himself around El even tighter. “Hey, you, Will and Max thinking of staying in that same apartment next year?”

“Talked about looking at bigger places,” El says, sleepy. “4 bedrooms. So we can all live together.”

Mike smiles. “Sounds nice. I wanna go look with you guys.”

“Ok.”

They drift off to sleep not much longer later, emotionally and physically exhausted, but together and safe, which is all that matters.

(and, in a few weeks, their freshman year drawing to a close, the party goes apartment hunting, but end up finding a 3-bedroom house with a separate mother-in-law suite almost equidistant from all of their schools. they move in in july – mike and el into the mother-in-law suite, lucas and max into the master bedroom, will and dustin into the other two rooms.

they'll live in this house for about a year until the couples start itching for their own space, until will seriously starts thinking about moving in with greg. but they'll never live more than a couple miles away from each other, no matter what twists and turns life throws at them. because if there's one rule that supersedes all of them, it's this: the party is forever.)

Notes for the Chapter:

Whee, another one done! Let me know what you think and I hope you all enjoyed! *hugs*

31. June 1990 - May 1992

Notes for the Chapter:

Hahaha, um...what? A 23k word chapter? How? What? How? (bonus points for anyone who knows that reference...)

So...enjoy? I gotta go examine my life choices....

June 1990 - May 1992

Time passes in a blink. Summer is spent half in Hawkins, spread across their various childhood homes, and half in Chicago, all crammed into that 3-bedroom apartment, not enough space for all of them, stepping on each other's toes and having the time of their lives.

The end of July comes and the Party moves into their new house, where they spend three weeks figuring out how to *live* together – who does what chore, how to buy food for all 6 of them, how to exist in the same space day after day.

And then the school year starts and it's all the same routines they built up the previous year, only with the knowledge that comes with being wizened college sophomores, all 19 going on 20, grown up and invincible.

For the most part, it's an idyllic year – cooking together, studying together, having late night camping trips in the backyard when the weather permits and weekend long movie marathons and game nights and going out to dinner at different restaurants when they can all afford it.

But then, it's April 1991 and things have changed. What was comforting and reassuring – the constant presence of the rest of the Party around them – begins to grate by the time they're half way through the spring semester. The couples are itching for their own space – something more intimate, more personal. Will's tired of going back and forth between the house and Greg's apartment. And Dustin's tired of constantly being around couples, *especially* after he breaks up

with Megan over the winter holiday, and he's desperate for his own space where he can wallow in peace without happy coupledom reminders shoved in his face constantly.

Because it's the Party, they know they can't live too far apart. And, in the end, the furthest distance between any of them is only a couple of miles – easily traversable by car or public transportation or even *walking* if the weather's nice enough.

But, first, they each have to find a place...

It's the rustling of papers that draws Mike out of the last vestiges of sleep. He blinks, squinting against the light that's shining into the room at just the right angle, and groans a bit. He rolls onto his back and props himself up onto his elbows as he looks around the bedroom. A quick glance at the clock tells him that it's just past 8 in the morning, which is early for a Saturday...and especially early for El, who's the source of the paper rustling.

For a moment, he just looks at her. El's sitting up in bed, blanket pulled up to her chest, pinned under her arms, but the whole of her back is exposed, revealing that she's just as naked as she was when they fell asleep just hours earlier. A soft smile stretches across Mike's face. This never gets old, waking up next to her. They've been sharing a bed for real for almost two years, living in the same room for almost half that time, and Mike knows that he's never going to get over being able to wake up by her side.

Yawning, Mike sits up, blanket falling to his waist. He reaches over to push El's hair aside so her bare shoulder is exposed, dropping a soft kiss against her skin before propping his chin on her shoulder. "Morning," he says, voice croaky with sleep, relishing in the feel of her bare skin against his. His hand trails down her naked back, fingers wrapping around her hip to hold her close. He leans into her, head tilting so that he's nestled in against the curve of her neck.

El turns her head just a bit. "Mmm, morning," she says, soft and light,

pressing a gentle kiss against his temple. She raises a hand and brushes it against his jaw. "Scratchy. Need to shave."

Mike grins and rubs his jaw against her neck and shoulder, eliciting a giggle from her. "Sorry," he says, clearly anything but. It feels like, with every month that passes, the frequency at which he needs to shave increases. When he first started, it was once every 5-6 days. Now, it's every other day. Mike knows he'll never be the kind of guy who sports a 5 o'clock shadow, but this whole facial hair situation is definitely still changing as he gets older. "Whatcha looking at?"

"Apartment listings," El says. "Couldn't sleep, so I'm going over the ones we're looking at today, deciding where to go first."

"You figured it out?" Mike asks, sighing contentedly. The feel of her against him, all warm and soft, lithe curves and supple skin, is amazing, soothing and thrilling all at once. Being with her, living with her, is like falling in love with her all over again each and every day, lives so entwined he couldn't even begin to separated them even if he wanted to (which he never, *ever* does).

Mike glances around the room, the evidence of their lives together all around him – the dresser and closet that holds both of their clothes, the bookshelves with his engineering books and her English and History books and the novels they both like to read, the large armchair they found at a thrift store that seats both of them if they don't mind snuggling (they never do), the bedding they picked out together – navy blue with white trim, simple and inviting – the rug she loves but he's ambivalent about, a green, shaggy monstrosity that he has to admit keeps the cool of the hard floor away from the bottom of his feet in the winter.

He wants, so badly, to have an entire house made up of them, of things they pick out together, a space just for the two of them. Which is why they're going apartment hunting in a matter of hours, El with a list of 2 bedroom, 2 bathroom places for them to look at (the second bed/bath is, of course, for anyone who visits, be it a member of the Party crashing overnight or Hop and Joyce coming out to Chicago to visit or even Steve, Jonathan, and Nancy, who have been living together for almost a year now and, from what Mike can gather, are completely and totally over-the-moon with the

arrangement).

“I think so,” El says, answering his question. “I was thinking we could start with this one,” she says, pointing at the most promising place on the list. “And then go clockwise. I’ve numbered them on the list.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Mike says. “Shower then breakfast?”

El turns to look at him, angling back so she can look at him wholly. “Wanna go out for breakfast? Make a day of it?”

Mike kisses her again, this time against the lips, soft and quick, heart still singing because, no matter what, the feel of her lips against his is *everything*. “Sounds perfect.”

El slides out of bed first, all excited smile and sparkling eyes, and, for a moment, Mike just looks at her, marveling at her – *so beautiful* – before he goes to follow, her closeness beckoning him like a Siren’s song.

They’re all giggles and light conversation as they shower, Mike helping El wash her hair (he loves, *loves* any opportunity to run his fingers through her hair), and then, the rest of the still sleeping house left behind, they’re driving to their favorite breakfast place, a small café diner that serves amazing Belgian waffles and the crispiest bacon. Mike and El sit across from each other, feet tangled up beneath the table, hands entwined while they drink their coffee, sharing their food once it comes out – in general, just being happy and in love.

“You think we’re gonna find a place today?” Mike says as he munches on a half slice of toast.

“We better,” El says. “Mr. Sah is asking if we’re gonna renew the lease for the house, but we know Will is moving in with Greg in a couple of months and Max and Lucas already have a place a few blocks from Greg’s apartment. So I want to be able to give him an answer soon.”

That’s the area they’re focusing on today – about a 2 mile radius that stretches across north-eastern Chicago near where everyone else

seems to be settling. “We’ll find a place,” Mike says, reaching for El’s hands, weaving his fingers between hers and giving it a squeeze.

El smiles, soft and a little anxious. “I hope so.” She lets out a laugh. “I mean, I have about 10 places on this dumb list. *One* of them should work for what we need.”

The first place, which seemed the most promising, is a bust – too dark, hallways too narrow, dingy and rundown and just...not what they’re looking for. The second place runs in a similar vein, as well as the third and the fourth.

Mike’s starting to get worried. El’s spirits are sinking lower and lower with each place they look at and he hopes they’ll find something. El’s been so diligent in her search and he really doesn’t want her to get discouraged.

So, as they drive up to the fifth place, towards the back half of the afternoon, Mike mentally crosses his fingers that this is better than any of the ones they’ve looked at so far.

It’s a small townhouse in a pocket neighborhood, one half of a duplex. There’s a cute fenced-in yard in the front – not huge, but enough for a small patio table or a planter box or something. The front door is painted a nice shade of forest green, the building itself a soft white. It looks inviting, homey...promising.

Mike looks over at El as she comes to stand next to him on the sidewalk that leads up to the house, her lower lip trapped between her teeth, paper clutched to her chest, looking all for the world like a kid on the first day of school. It tugs on Mike’s heartstrings and he reaches out, fingers gently prying one hand away from the paper El’s holding so he can clasp her hand in his. “Hey, looks nice, yeah?”

“Yeah,” El says, letting out a soft breath.

“Let’s go knock on the door,” Mike says, tugging her down the walkway.

With El still holding the paper in her free hand, it’s up to Mike to knock on the door and, after a few moments, it opens to reveal a

middle-aged woman, blonde hair cut in a shining bob, a perky smile stretching her lips. “Hi, are you here to check the place out?”

Mike nudges El with his elbow and is relieved when she steps forward with a nod. “Yes, I saw the ad in the paper a couple days ago?”

“Great!” the woman says, stepping forward and holding out her hand. “I’m Genevieve, by the way, but you can call me Jenny.”

El takes her hand, shaking it. “I’m El, and this is Mike.”

Mike shakes Jenny’s hand next. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Jenny steps aside and waves Mike and El in. “Well, come on in, take a look!” Mike and El walk inside the townhouse, Jenny closing the door behind them. “It’s not furnished, so you would have to do that yourselves. But it’s a great space, nice and homey. Great lighting.”

But Mike’s barely paying attention to the place, though it’s really nice – high ceilings, light hardwood floors, clean, white walls. But he’s too busy looking at El, who’s looking around, mouth parted in a soft “O”, spinning around slowly as she tries to take everything in. She looks *enchanted* and Mike just knows they’re not going to need to look at any other places.

El stops so she can look at him, beaming so bright it’s almost painful how beautiful she is. “Mike, let’s look around.”

Jenny lets out a laugh that’s almost a giggle. “Yes, go ahead and look around. You and your wife take all the time you need.”

El blushes and starts to shake her head. “We’re not-”

But the idea that this woman thinks he and El are married hits him like a physical blow. He *loves* that even complete strangers can take one look at them and think that Mike and El are married like it’s a natural conclusion to come to. It’s just too thrilling and Mike doesn’t want to let it go. Because, some day, it’s going to be *real*. “Great, thanks!” Mike says, cutting El off. “Come on, honey, let’s go look around.”

Mike tugs El further into the townhouse, smile threatening to etch permanently onto his face. He leads them through into the kitchen – white tile countertops, linoleum on the floors, light wood cabinets – when El jerks on his arm, spinning him a bit so she can look up at him.

“Mike,” she says, voice low. “Why’d you lie to Jenny? We’re *not* married!”

Mike just looks at her for a second, looks down into her amusingly stern face, all *friends don’t lie* indignation and flushed cheeks, and *god* she’s so beautiful. He means to say something, he really does. But all he can think of to do in the moment is kiss her.

So he does.

Before she can say anything, Mike takes El’s face in his hands and kisses her, pouring everything he’s feeling into the act of his lips pressed against her, soft and warm beneath his. Her lips part automatically, relaxing against his, slanting just so. Someday, he’s going to kiss her like this when they stand at an altar, in front of all their family and friends, wedding rings still cool on each other’s fingers, her dressed in white while he wears a tux.

But, in his heart, right now, they’re already there, lives and hearts so entwined that there will never be any untangling them, married in every way except in the eyes of the law.

The kiss slowly ends and Mike finds that he’s panting a bit, breathing rushing to keep up with the pounding of his heart. He looks down at El to see her looking adorably dazed, cheeks flushed for a different reason, lips parted just so, all tempting and alluring and *god*, he wants to kiss her again....

“Mike?” El breathes, the annoyance having faded to soft, adorable confusion.

Mike takes in a deep breath and speaks. “I know we’re not married,” he says, softly, voice low. “But, one day, we will be.” He gulps, trembling a bit, hands still cupping her face. “Someday, you’re going to be my wife and I’m going to be your husband. Who cares if people

think we're already married? We'll just practice getting used to hearing it."

El's eyes widen, a soft gasp escaping from her parted lips and then, a heartbeat later, she smiles. "You're an incurable romantic, Mike Wheeler."

Mike smiles and leans in to brush his nose against hers in an eskimo kiss. "Only because you make it so easy."

El stretches up on her toes to press a soft kiss against his lips. "I love you," she says after she pulls away, taking her hands in his. "Let's go look around." She grins, lowering their hands so they're clasped between them. "I have a feeling this place is the one."

Mike laughs, shaking his head, his heart feeling like it's about to burst, it's so full. "Me, too," he says.

So Mike lets El drag him around the townhouse, the two of them marveling over the high ceilings and the master bedroom in the upstairs loft and the open living space and Mike knows, from the smile on El's face to the way it already feels like home, that this is the place for them.

Mike and El move into that townhouse in June. They save up their money – Mike from his job at the library, El from her job at a coffee shop near University of Chicago – to buy whatever furniture they can afford from various thrift stores and the local Goodwill.

At first, when they move in, they just have their bedroom furniture, a slightly nicked dining room table with 6 mismatched chairs, a second hand sofa, a futon in the downstairs bedroom, and a 20" TV with a VCR on a stand in the living room. They have various odds and ends in the kitchen – plates, utensils, cookware – but that's about it. Over time, they'll gather more stuff, stuff that matches and makes the place feel homey and *theirs* for however long it is (*not that they know this when they move in, but they'll live here until the year el gets pregnant,*

7 years from now, when they'll finally have enough money to buy a house).

The townhouse is only a mile and a half from where Lucas and Max's apartment is situated, a bit further away from Will and Greg's place, and a mile from the studio apartment that Dustin ends up renting. There's a cute front yard and a small, enclosed backyard off the kitchen where El wants to try her hand at growing herbs and vegetables. She's been getting into cooking over the last couple of years (she loves the joy it brings others when she makes something they like) and having ingredients on hand is so very appealing to her.

Being that it's summer, neither Mike nor El are taking classes. Instead, they're upping the hours that they're working at their respective jobs – Mike as a student assistant at the library at Northwestern, El as a barista and cook at a café where she makes pastries when she's not taking orders for coffee.

It's a week after Mike and El move into their townhouse and he's coming home after an all day shift at the library. El worked in the morning, starting a few hours before he did, and was up and out of the house before he woke up. There's a vague memory of her kissing him goodbye, but he was too asleep for the memory to fully imprint.

So, other than her voice in his head, Mike hasn't had any contact with El *all day* and he needs to fix that immediately.

Hey, I'm almost home, he says as he turns down their street. *Where are you?*

In the kitchen, El responds, gentle excitement in her voice. *Just doing dishes.*

Grinning, Mike pulls up in front of the townhouse, parking the car on the curb, and practically *runs* inside, messenger bag thumping against his hip with every step.

Once inside, Mike takes a look around. From the front door, he can see practically the entire first floor of the townhouse – living room area off to his left, dining area off to the right, the kitchen leading straight back from there – but he can't see all the way into the

kitchen, where El is standing at the sink. So, dropping his stuff by the door, Mike heads into the kitchen and then he sees her.

For a moment, Mike almost can't breathe. El's facing away from him as she stands at the sink, drying off dishes with kitchen towel, levitating them up to their place in the cabinet while she dries the next. She's wearing a thin tank top and an old pair of sleep shorts, her hair pulled up in a messy bun, as she stands with her weight resting on one leg, the other leg bent slightly at the knee, toes on the ground, heel pressed against her other ankle. Even like this, dressed for housework, old clothes and hair done up messily, she's still the most beautiful person Mike's ever laid eyes on.

Mike's heart is pounding, *racing*, excitement running through his veins, the yearning to be near her overwhelming and undeniable.

So, he gives in, easy as breathing, and walks the short distance to where El is standing, his arms immediately wrapping around her to pull her into the curve of his body. "Hi," he says, reaching down to press a kiss against the corner of her jaw.

El takes in a deep breath, a sigh, and leans back just enough to press her weight against him. "Hi, welcome home."

Home. Home where she is, where their lives are, where it's just the two of them and the love they have for each other. It's more than he ever could have dreamed of.

"How was your day?" El's asking, drawing Mike out of his reverie.

Mike sighs. "Good, long," he says against her neck, unable to keep from peppering the skin with light kisses, feeling the familiar stirrings of desire beginning to bubble in his veins. "Spent most of the day watching the desk." His mouth moves up to the small patch of skin just beneath El's ear, teeth nipping at the spot, feeling her shiver beneath his touch. "Started writing a campaign," he says. "Mostly outlined it, though." It also feels like it might make a good novel, this campaign idea of his – even if he's not ready to admit that to anyone but himself. He's been toying around with the idea of trying to write a book and he's been hunting for an idea good enough to give it a go.

But that's really not what's important right now.

One of his hands slips just under the hem of El's tank top while he nibbles at the delicate curve of her earlobe.

El lets out a breathy whimper. "Mike," she gets out. "I was about to get started on dinner."

Mike grins against her skin, hand moving up even higher. "I missed you today," he says. "How about, instead of dinner, we go upstairs and I can show you just how much?" He pauses, laughing, thumb of his other hand hooking in the elastic waist of her shorts, plucking at it teasingly. "Or, I can show you right here. I'm not picky." It's one of his favorite things about having their own place – he can seduce her in the kitchen and there's no one else there to care. Meanwhile, his hand moves higher still, mapping out the curve of her, skin soft beneath his palm....

"But, I – *oh*." El presses her head against his shoulder and Mike knows, from the way her back's arching and the mewling sounds that are escaping from between her parted lips, that she's on the same page he is.

El turns in his embrace, his hand under her shirt landing high on her back, and stretches up on her toes to capture his mouth in a kiss that threatens to swallow him whole, setting fire in his veins and sending electric surges up and down every inch of his skin. Mike groans into the kiss, lips molding to hers, the hand at her waist coming up to pull out the tie that holds her hair in its loose bun. A couple of tugs later and her hair spills gloriously down her back, strands just waiting for his fingers to run through them.

And then El's pushing him, hands sneaking under his shirt, guiding him back towards the direction of the stairs as her palms slide up his torso.

They shed clothes like trail markers as they make their way up the stairs, exposed skin set on fire by eager palms and nimble fingers, almost tripping over their own feet in their haste, mouths unable to part to see where they're going. They almost don't make it to the bedroom when a long detour up against the wall by the door

threatens to become their final destination – *mouths on skin, her legs around his hips, his fingers digging into her thighs*. But they eventually make it, words long since obsolete, the only language spoken between them one of caresses and gasps and the motion of their bodies, a language they've been fluent in for years.

They make love in the glorious late afternoon sun, light streaming in from tall windows, in the bed that they've been sharing for almost two years, in this place that has already become home since home is always where the other is. After, they make dinner together, all soft smiles and unable to stop touching each other with gentle hands as they work together and Mike's never been happier. It's been a long road to get to this point, and there's still miles and miles of road to go, but as long as he's with her, he'll never complain about the journey, one he hopes will go on forever.

It's September before anyone knows it.

The summer passes in a haze of part time jobs and quick jaunts to Hawkins, settling in to new homes and planning for the new school year ahead, half of college firmly behind them.

It's late on a Thursday as Mike drives home from a tutoring session and he's *exhausted*.

He and Dustin both signed up to be Physics tutors and were supposed to have tutored the group of 10 students that came that night as a team, but Dustin bailed last minute for, and Mike can quote, "a hot date", leaving Mike to tutor all on his own. Mike's happy Dustin's trying to get back on the horse and all, after breaking up with Megan. But did it have to be *tonight*?

Still, despite that he had to manage tutoring 10 freshman on his own, each one of them anxious and concerned and just so overwhelmed, Mike has to admit it's more satisfying that he could have ever thought. Most of his experience teaching up to this point had been helping El, either when he first met her when she looked up to him to

teach her everything about the world or later when he actually tutored her to help her through some of her classes. He'd always enjoyed helping her, feeling a particular sense of pride and satisfaction whenever El's face would light up in understanding, but Mike always thought that it was helping *El* that gave him that feeling.

Now, Mike thinks it's the act of just *helping* people, teaching them, watching it click whenever he explains something so they can understand, that gave him that feeling. Mike Wheeler likes teaching and it's enough to start making him wonder if he's on the right path, that maybe becoming an engineer *isn't* what he's meant to be doing.

But, it's late and Mike knows that these kinds of decisions are best made when *not* tired, he thinks as he sits at an intersection 5 minutes from home, red light taunting him – *really, all he wants to do is get home to El and this traffic light is the last thing standing between him and her*. Besides, Mike doesn't want to go changing his entire future without talking to El about it. He's not sure about having the discussion with her tonight, but he at least wants to mention something when he gets home.

The light finally turns green and Mike sighs, eager to get home to El, not the least so he can see her again (it always chafes, the way he misses her throughout the day, like every moment spent apart from her is just *wrong*).

It's too bad, then, the way he notices something rushing at him out of the corner of his left eye.

Before Mike can even process what's going on, before he can so much as *question*, much less panic, his whole world explodes in a flash of white – *sharp pain, quick and hot, a hollow, sickening snap*.

And then everything suddenly, *alarmingly*, cuts to black.

El's sitting in bed when she feels it happen.

Books and papers for her history class – *Culture and Society in Western Civilization* – are scattered across the bedspread as she works on her first big essay for the class. She’s flipping through one of the books, trying to find a quote she *knows* she saw not an hour ago, when the sensation of something crashing into her alights along every nerve. El barely has time to gasp before her whole body *explodes* with pain – slicing into her side, crunching her left shin.

Oh, no. Mike.

El manages to stumble from bed, trembling uncontrollably, unable to breathe, and she makes it a few steps before the world sways beneath her feet and everything goes black around her.

She comes to she doesn’t know how long later, collapsed on the floor, sore like she worked every muscle for hours on end, like she’s been batted around like a mouse being toyed with by a cat. Dizziness pulls at her as she tries to get to her feet, but El’s not going to let anything keep her down. Not when something’s wrong with Mike.

El reaches for him along their connection, trying to find out something, *anything*. But it’s silent, dark. Shaking, she closes her eyes as she gets to her feet, focusing on where Mike is, slipping into the Void as easy as breathing.

But all it takes is a glimpse of hospital whites and blues, a swarm of doctors and nurses around a bed, before El opens her eyes, too scared to see more, stomach churning and turning with nausea. A low, panicked moan sounds from her throat and the lights flicker around her. “No, no, no, no,” escapes from her lips, a litany, a prayer, a desperate plea. El can feel the hot pricks of tears blossom in her eyes and she fumbles for the phone on her nightstand, fingers shaking so hard she can barely press the numbers on the keypad.

The phone rings a couple of times before Will picks up, sounding almost half-asleep. A quick glance at the clock shows that’s is almost 1 in the morning. “Hello?”

“Will,” she sobs, fast losing control of whatever tenuous hold she has on her emotions.

“El, what’s wrong?” Will asks, immediately concerned, voice pitching low with worry.

“It’s Mike,” she manages to get out. “I need – he’s in the – I-”

“El, where are you?” El can hear it in Will’s voice – the worry, the fear, the panic he’s barely holding onto, trying to be strong for her.

“Home.”

“And Mike?”

“Hospital. But I don’t know which – I don’t know what *happened*. I could feel it, Will. I can still *feel it*. Please, I need, I just...*please*.”

“El, you need to listen to me,” Will says, the words trembling despite their strength. “I’m coming to get you, ok? I want you to put on some shoes and a jacket, grab your purse, grab anything Mike might need, ok? We’ll find where he is and everything will be ok, I promise.”

El squeezes her eyes shut, tears leaking from under closed eyelids, and nods. “Ok,” she says, needing to believe him even if there’s part of her that doesn’t, the sad, lost little girl inside who has no hope.

El hangs up the phone and follows Will’s instructions – shoes, jacket, purse – and goes outside to sit on the front step. She hugs her knees close to her chest, arms wrapped tight around her legs, and buries her face, rocking back and forth slightly. *Please, please be ok. I love you. I need you.* She can’t bring herself to search Mike out in the Void again, can’t bear it just in case it’s the last time she sees him. *Not like that. I can’t.*

El looks up at every car that passes, only for a split second, burying her face back in her knees when it’s not Will’s beat up Honda Civic. But, eventually – *not soon enough* – Will’s blue Civic pulls up in front of the townhouse and El immediately launches herself to her feet, all but running down the walk to where Will’s already leaning over, opening the passenger door. “Go that way,” El says, pointing in the direction where she knows Mike is. Now that Will’s here, urgency fills her, burns in her veins, makes her antsy and unsettled.

“Put your seat belt on,” Will says, voice unyielding. “No one else is

getting hurt tonight.”

El does as Will asks and then they're off, El guiding Will, one terse direction at a time, feeling her way to where Mike is.

And all her worse fears are confirmed when they pull up to the hospital, the building looming large in front of her, all glass and metal, back-lit sign ominous with its sterility. Will drives them to the emergency room entrance and stops, car still running. “Go,” Will says. “I’ll park and then come find you. *Go.*”

El doesn't say anything. She just nods and unbuckles her seat belt. Then she's flying from the car, feeling like she's swimming through something lighter than air, all floaty and surreal as she rushes in through the automatic doors. Her heart pounds and it's like slow motion envelops her on her journey to the nurses' station. El tries so, so hard not to let the atmosphere around her get to her – sterile walls, white tile, medical equipment, the smell of the disinfectant – but it brings back memories she thought long in her past, buried and done with, and her breathing picks up, edging on hysterical, sharp and nauseating.

El's barely holding everything together as she stops at the desk and a distant corner of her mind hopes she doesn't look as lost and discombobulated as she feels. “Excuse me?”

A woman in a nurse's uniform – purple scrubs, hair pulled back in a no-nonsense bun – looks up. “Fill out the paperwork and have a seat. We'll be with you shortly.”

“Um, no,” El says, voice shaking, fingers trembling where they're clutching her purse. “I'm not, I – I'm here for Mike? Um, Mike Wheeler? He should be....”

The nurse sighs, looking kind but stern. “I'm sorry, we can't divulge any information about any potential patients.”

El feels her lips trembling. “Please, I just need to see him. I need to *know* he's ok.”

“Miss, I'm really sorry, but only family can-”

El can't help the words that come out of her mouth next – her only defense is the sheer desperation that threatens to make everything around her explode – she can hear the whine of the lights around her begin to pitch higher. "I'm his fiancée!" she says in a rush. It's a lie, a *total lie*. And she would be ashamed of it if the nurse's face didn't soften in return. "*Please*. I *need* to see him."

"Ok, honey," the nurse says. "Let's see what we can do." The nurse leads El through a series of questions – Mike's name, birthdate, address, what her name is, etcetera – before she smiles. "Let me go grab a doctor, ok? I'll be back. Why don't you have a seat while you wait?"

El nods, lower lip trembling with the effort to hold back her tears. "Ok," she says, voice small and lost and scared – *childlike*.

Will comes in 10 minutes later while El is still waiting, sitting with her face in her hands, fingers curled against her hairline. He doesn't say a word as he sits down next to her, for which El is eternally grateful, and when he slides his arm over her shoulder, El leans in, her head coming to rest on Will's shoulder. It's only with his calm steadiness that El realizes just how badly she's shaking and she feels the tears she's been subsuming rise up to just below the surface, threatening to break. But she can't, she *can't*. Not until she knows. She has to hold it together until she knows he's going to be ok.

So her sobs stay locked down. But El can't stop the handful of tears that escape, trailing hot down her cheek to land on Will's shirt. She snuffles, hand coming up to dry her face, and feels Will's arm hold her tighter.

They don't talk, not at all, and not until a doctor is approaching them – white coat, thick glasses, maybe in his mid-forties. "Ms. Hopper?"

El stands in a rush, almost dizzily, Will right at her side. "Yes?"

"Hi, I'm Dr. Jenkins, the emergency room supervisor. Let's step out of the waiting room to talk," the doctor says, head jerking in the direction he's talking about.

El nods. "Ok. Can my brother come?" she asks, glancing over at Will.

Dr. Jenkins nods, smiling kindly. “Of course. He’ll be Mr. Wheeler’s brother-in-law soon, so I count that as family.”

El gulps, feeling Will’s eyes boring into her, but she ignores it. “Right, lead the way.”

The three of them walk the short distance to the corner of the nearby hallway, away from the people who are waiting for help. “How much do you know?” Dr. Jenkins asks.

“Just that he’s here,” El says, forcing the words through the thickness in her throat. “I don’t know what happened.”

The doctor smiles. “Your fiancé was in a car accident, Ms. Hopper. A driver ran the red light and slammed into the driver’s side of the car.” Oh god, she’s going to faint. El hurriedly reaches out for Will, her fingers clamping around his arm, trying to keep the darkness at the edge of her vision from closing in any further. “Now, he’s in surgery still – there was some internal damage from the laceration on his left side where a large shard of glass cut into him, but I assure you, Mr. Wheeler is in good hands. Other than that, he has a broken tibia – that’s the shin bone – and minor lacerations and bruising on his arms and face.”

El closes her eyes for a brief second, trying to gather strength and find some sense of calm. “Is he...is he going to be ok?”

“He’ll have a cast for the leg,” the doctor explains. “And he’ll need to come in for some follow-up visits – to remove the stitches at least, I’m sure. But I would expect him to make a full recovery with time and physical therapy.”

Full recovery. El latches on the words like a lifeline. “Can I see him?”

“He’s going to be in surgery for a couple more hours at least,” Dr. Jenkins says. “And then he’ll be in a recovery room. But I expect you’ll be able to see him in a few hours. Now, do you have any of Mr. Wheeler’s insurance information?”

El shakes her head, suddenly feeling overwhelmed. Insurance? God, does *she* have insurance? She has to, right? “No. I’m sure his parents

do, but they're in Hawkins? It's in Indiana."

"That's fine," Dr. Jenkin says. "As long as you can get us the information in the next couple of days, we can make sure that's all taken care of. Now, the cafeteria's not making food, but there's still coffee and snacks available if you want to something to eat while you wait. Otherwise, do you have any questions for me?"

"No," El says, voice trembling. "Thank you."

"I'll come get you when you can see him, Ms. Hopper. And don't worry; everything's going to be fine." Dr. Jenkins gives El a sympathetic squeeze on the shoulder and a quick smile before he walks away, leaving El and Will standing in the hallway.

This is when El just *loses* it. She turns and throws herself at Will, sobs breaking free. Will's arms wrap around her, tight, as she sobs against his shoulder, the lights around them flickering in time with her breathing. El feels Will's hand card through her hair, fingers pressing against her scalp in soothing circular strokes, and El cries just that much harder. "Hey," Will says, softly, like he's soothing a spooked animal – and maybe he is. "It's going to be ok. You heard the doctor. Mike's going to be ok."

And El knows that. But she's very quickly becoming aware that it could have been very, *very* different. That he could have very easily not been ok or, worse, died. She could have lost him *forever* and the knowledge is threatening to swallow her whole.

So she just cries against Will's shoulder, holding him as tight as he's holding her, letting the gentle warmth of her brother's body seep into her, so, *so* grateful for his presence.

Eventually, her tears slow and El can feel the exhaustion setting in. "Hey, let's go sit down," Will says, guiding her back to the waiting room chairs. "I'm going to go call Mom and Hop, see if they can call Mike's parents, before I call the rest of the Party. Do you want anything? Water, coffee, something to eat?"

El shakes her head, stomach churning too much to even welcome the *thought* of anything in it. "No, I-I can't right now," she says as she sits.

Will nods and turns to walk away, but El grabs his hand, looking up as he looks back, questioning, concerned. “Thank you,” she says, softly, unsure what she’s thanking him for specifically – for being there, for driving her, for picking up the phone, for being her brother – but she has to say it.

Will turns his hand in her grasp and squeezes. “Of course,” he says. And then he’s gone, leaving El alone, alone with her own thoughts and worries and anxious need. She clutches her purse close to her stomach, curling around the bag as if doing so will give her comfort, and settles into wait.

It doesn’t take long for the rest of the Party to show up. Within the hour, all 5 of them are huddled in a corner of the waiting room, waiting for news of their Paladin. El hasn’t cried since before Will went off to call everyone and she’s anxiously awaiting not only news from Mike, but also for Hop and Joyce and Karen to get there. There’s a weight in the pit of her stomach that is calling out for Hop, for his big, bear hugs and gruff, silent support and she just *needs* him in a way she’s never needed him before.

It’s while El’s lazily pondering this, her head pillowed on Max’s shoulder, her legs outstretched over Will’s lap – she’ll never be able to fully express just how grateful she is for their support, will never be able to tell them just how much she loves them – when Dr. Jenkins makes a reappearance. It’s been at least a few hours (*4 hours and 26 minutes*, a corner of her brain that’s been obsessed with the clock whispers) since El arrived at the hospital and she’s eager for news, heart suddenly pounding up near her throat.

El stands in a rush, alerting the rest of the Party, and she hears them come to stand behind her as she approaches the doctor. “How is he?” she asks, not even bothering with pleasantries, the words out of her mouth with almost stark rudeness. But she doesn’t care. All that matters to her in this moment is *Mike*.

“He’s fine, resting,” Dr. Jenkins says. “He hasn’t woken up yet – the

anesthesia is still wearing off, so he'll be sleeping for a while longer, but he should be awake in a few hours. Would you like to see him?" He pauses, looking at the small crowd. "I don't think you all can go, but I think you should be able to stay in the room with him, Ms. Hopper. I can't promise it'll be comfortable, but I'm sure he'll like to see you when he wakes up. Once visiting hours are in effect, you all should be able to see him."

El bites her lip and turns to see the rest of the Party, uncertain and guilty. Surely, they all want to go see him, too, right? But it's Lucas who speaks. "You should go, El," Lucas says. "He'll want to see you before the rest of us."

"Yeah," Dustin says. "We can come back later. If anyone's gonna be in the room with him, it should be you."

El nods, so thankful, and turns back to the doctor. "I'd like to see him, thank you."

And, so, after a series of quick goodbyes to the rest of the Party, El follows Dr. Jenkins down the twists and turns of the hospital's corridors, trying her best to memorize the route, but also knowing all she needs to do to find Mike is follow the thread that connects him to her.

Dr. Jenkins stops in front of a non-descript beige door, like all the other doors along the hallway, and turns to her. "He's right in here," the doctor says. "Now, he might not look the best and he's still sleeping, so don't be too shocked when you see him."

El gulps, but she nods. "Ok," she says, voice sounding too small, nothing like her own, nothing like the woman she knows she's grown up to become.

"If you need anything, there's a call button by the bed. And the nurses make regular rounds, so someone will be by eventually. And, Ms. Hopper?"

El sucks in a deep breath. "Yeah?"

"Everything will be fine. He's a strong, healthy young man. He'll get

better and then it'll just be a memory. You'll see."

El just nods, trying to internalize the hope that Dr. Jenkins' words were clearly meant to inspire, before she turns to walk into the hospital room.

She gets a handful of steps into the room before she freezes, eyes closing at the overwhelming sensations around her – the smell of disinfectant, the beep of the machinery – bringing back memories that El would rather forget, of a time when she was much smaller, when her world was miniscule, confined to four walls and rooms full of tests.

But there's a reason El's here, someone who needs her, who she needs so very, very much.

So El opens her eyes.

And *gasps*.

Mike.

He's lying on a bed in the middle of the room, starched white sheets pulled up to his chest except for his left leg, which is propped up outside of the blankets, plaster cast encasing the limb from the knee down. El swallows roughly at the way he's lying there, motionless, frozen in a sickening tableau. Trembling, El steps closer to the bed, coming around so she's standing next to the right side of the bed, the side of Mike that is mostly uninjured, and looks down.

Mike's face is turned towards her, which lets El see the cuts and bruises that litter the left side of his face – none of them serious, but each of them worrying. He's wearing a hospital gown, which hides whatever evidence of surgery is underneath. There's an IV drip attached to the back of his right hand, a heartbeat monitor on the index finger of his left, and he's so, so pale, almost sallow, that El can almost see the thin veins that run just beneath the surface of his skin.

He looks *wrong*. Mike's face is always so full of expression, whether smiling or laughing or scowling or talking, always in motion, always so full of life. This is wrong, deeply wrong, and a quiet sob escapes

from El's lips before she can stop it, the sound harsh against the quiet sterility of the room.

El looks around and pulls a chair over to her with her powers, refusing to move away from Mike's side, and she takes his right hand in both of hers as she sits down, a handful of silent tears slipping down her cheeks.

Despite the setting, despite the circumstances, despite the roiling of emotion that shifts inside her veins, making her feel slightly nauseated, a sharp sense of relief floods her. Because it could have been worse, *so much* worse. Mike's alive – injured, but *alive*. And it's becoming more and more apparent that El could have lost him, that she could have lost her other half, the person she needs more than *anything*, and it scares her so much to think about living without him. And she's realizing that, someday, she might have to. They're not going to live forever and, someday, they're going to die – both of them are. And she doesn't know what scares her more: him dying and her having to live without him, or the thought of him alone after she dies. It makes her heart hurt, squeezing tight in her chest, stealing her breath.

The tears are falling in earnest and El does nothing to hold them back. She's just a mess of emotion – relieved beyond measure that Mike's going to be fine, deeply scared at how close she came to losing him, horrified at the thought that, one day, they'll no longer be here.

Holding Mike's hand tight, El leans over to rest lay her head down on the blanket, forehead pressed against his forearm, taking solace in whatever comfort she can get.

It's not enough, though.

So, El closes her eyes and slips into the Void without a second thought.

Here, in the Void, Mike's whole and healthy, injuries only a memory. He's still in the hospital bed, still surrounded by unnatural cleanliness and machinery, but there's no chance of El hurting him as she climbs into the bed next to him, pulling him into the Void with her.

He doesn't stir, though, as she settles next to him, his familiar warmth engulfing her like a favorite blanket, love and happiness and *home* all at the same time. El folds his right arm over his chest before she follows suit, draping her arm over his chest, hooking a leg over his, cheek pressed against his shoulder. Her tears are still falling, even in the Void, soaking through the thin fabric of Mike's hospital gown. She just loves Mike so much, is so grateful he's in her life, that he's *still* in her life. She just wants to hold onto him and never let him go.

El falls asleep like this, her hand on Mike's chest, the reassuring thump of his heartbeat beneath her palm, her own heart matching the rhythm of his. And when she wakes, maybe a couple of hours later, she's back in the real world, back creaking with pain from falling asleep hunched over, wondering what's going on, wondering what pulled her from her sleep.

And then Mike's hand twitches in her grip and he lets out a soft groan.

El's heart leaps into her throat and she leans in, sitting up straighter, shifting the hold she has on his hand so one of her palms is pressed to his, fingers weaving together. "Mike? It's me." Her throat tightens with tears and she can feel the burn of them in her eyes – she knows it won't be long until her tears are falling once more.

Mike's eyes move beneath closed lids, his brow furrowing, face scrunching in discomfort, lips pulling in a frown. He lets out another groan, the sound almost a whimper and ripping El's heart in two, and his eyes open, blinking blearily. "El?" His voice is scratchy, voice dry from the anesthesia and the trauma and sleeping, and he sounds a little out of it. But it's *Mike* and that's what matters.

"Yeah," she says, forcing the words through her tears, which are now flowing down her cheeks. "How are you feeling?"

Mike looks up at her, confused and concerned. "Hey, why are you crying? Don't cry."

El can't help the sobbing laugh that bursts from her. Even injured and in the hospital, and Mike's first thought is to be concerned for her.

She doesn't think it's possible to love him anymore than she does right in this moment. "Just happy you're awake," she says, lips stretching in a smile before she sobers up a bit. "You're in the hospital. You were in a car accident, do you remember?"

Mike closes his eyes, thinking for a moment, before he looks back up at her, shaking her head. "I remember driving home, but I...." He gulps, sighing. "What happened?"

"Someone ran the red light," El says, voice trembling. "You broke your leg and they had to do surgery to fix your left side." She shrugs. "I'm not entire sure what happened. I just...I could feel it happening, Mike." El looks down at him, his beautiful face looking back up at her, all soft and concerned and trusting and so full of love and she feels her heart break all over again. "I almost lost you." And then she starts sobbing.

Mike wakes up in a haze, everything sore and oddly distant, like he's been separated from his body. He almost wants to sink back into unconsciousness, but El's voice reaches through the haze and grabs hold of him, all soft and worried and beautiful.

He manages to open his eyes to El's crying face and his heart twists. And then she's telling him about a car accident and that he's in the hospital, that she almost lost him. And when she bursts into tears, Mike feels the twist in his heart turn into a shattering.

Everything hurts, the haze starting to disappear, but Mike still reaches for her despite the way his skin along the left side of his torso pulls and complains, reaching for her until she's crawling onto the bed next to him, both of them squeezing on the narrow surface. El pillows her head on his shoulder, face buried against him, and Mike brings up his right hand to cup the back of her head, muttering soft sounds of comfort, even as his own eyes mist over with tears. "It's ok," he says, softly. "You're not gonna lose me."

Mike knows this is a lie, though, just not in the way he means. Death

comes for all of them in its own time and, one day, it'll get the both of them. But, until then, he's never going to let her go.

El sobs against him, Mike crying silent tears as he holds her. "I've got you," he says, the words becoming a mantra. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I never wanted to worry you. Please, don't cry. I love you." He repeats these phrases over and over again, his tears getting worse all the while.

It pains him to know that she's hurting because of him, that he's the cause of her tears. Mike swore he would never make her cry out of pain again and he's broken that promise he made to himself all those years ago.

So, despite the pain along his side – throbbing and sharp – Mike holds onto El as she cries, wanting to always be there for her, wanting never to be the cause of her pain again.

(it won't be the last time he makes her cry. losing their tempers when the strain of being new parents gets to them, their words tired and careless. snapping at her after his mom dies 40 years later. on his deathbed, at the ripe old age of 92, promising to wait for her, her following him a mere 24 hours later. but there are happy tears, too – the day he proposes, the day they get married, the birth of their two children, the day his first book gets published and he dedicates it to her. what will matter is that they get through it the same way they get through everything: together, always together).

Mike comes home from the hospital a couple of days later – the entire Hawkins contingent constantly circulating in and out of his room, all worried smiles and palpable relief, his mother and Joyce both fussing over him, Hop with his gruff concern, the rest of the Party trying to keep his spirits up.

The cast on his foot means crutches, which means, with the stitches in his side, no going up and down stairs for him for a while. El levitates their bed down to the second bedroom, propping up and

moving aside the futon they have there, so they can sleep where he doesn't need to worry about hobbling upstairs and possible pulling out his stitches along his side.

Luckily, El's side of the bed is to the right of Mike's, so there's no rearranging necessary for them to sleep like they normally do. And if El is a lot clingier, molding herself against Mike's uninjured side every night without fail, needing the reassurance of feeling him next to her, with her, Mike doesn't say anything about it. In fact, he likes that she can't stop touching him, that she needs him. Because he needs her so, so much.

Mike goes to the impound lot to pick up his things from his now ruined car and it hits him, seeing the crunched up and mangled driver's side, just how close he came to dying. If the guy who hit him had been going a little faster, or hit at just a different angle, that would have been it. So El's constant snuggling isn't just comforting for her; it's comforting for him, too, affirming and reassuring and calming all at the same time.

One of the biggest changes after the accident is that the physicality of their relationship takes a backseat while Mike's healing. The first couple of weeks, sex is almost completely out of the question. The stitches along Mike's left side still hurt and the painkillers make him tired, causing him to fall asleep early almost every night. And, when he's off the painkillers and, thus, not as tired, they're still not back to the way they used to be. Their sex life moves almost entirely to the Void during the weeks following. It's easier than accidentally hurting Mike's leg, which is still in the cast, and he feels better in the Void – normal, healthy, healed.

In fact, it takes them until 5 weeks after the accident, until the cast is off, before they make love in real life instead of the Void. And, in both real life and in the Void, the accident has changed even this, has changed how they are together.

Suddenly, it's like they're 17 again, when everything was new and every flat surface, horizontal or otherwise, is filled with potential. There's an edge of desperation to their love making now, though, that wasn't there before – sweet and deep and breathless, spiced with the knowledge of how close they came to losing each other.

Still, they're getting back to normal – as normal as they can get, at any rate – and the heightened desperation will calm in time, but one thing is for sure.

Mike and El will never be able to get enough of one another.

No matter what curveballs life throws their way.

It's 6 weeks after the accident, the beginning of November. It's a quiet Saturday night and Mike and El are cuddled on the couch, watching a movie. They could have gone out with everyone else – Max is going to see 'Jacob's Ladder' and is dragging everyone with her – but El didn't want to go.

Not when she can be snuggled up on the couch with Mike, her legs draped over his lap, her head on his shoulder, while they watch "Big", which they rented along with "Die Hard 2".

They're about halfway through the movie, but El's barely paying attention. She's too busy drawing aimless patterns on Mike's chest through the thin t-shirt he's wearing, occasionally running her finger along the collar or across his neck, her touch slow and soft. Every once in a while, Mike lets out a sigh or a low moan. And it's not like his hands are idle, either.

He's got one hand on her knee where it's draped over him and he's lazily running his fingers up and down the outer curve of her thigh, his touch burning through the thin flannel PJ pants she has on.

It's a slow, lazy seduction, progress measured in inches, a gradual boiling of love and desire.

But, eventually, the tension breaks.

Mike lets out a laugh, low and shiver-inducing, when El runs her touch over the hollow between his collarbones, his skin soft beneath her fingertips. "Just gonna tease me all night?"

El giggles. “No,” she says liltingly, feeling coy, powerful. “Just taking my time, is all.” She lifts her head to look him in the eye, her eyebrows arching playfully. “Hasn’t anyone told you it’s about the journey, not the destination?”

Mike’s grinning, looking all handsome and rakish, it threatens to make El’s heart pound right out of her chest. “But, you gotta admit, the destination’s pretty amazing in this case.”

El smiles back and moves, shifting herself on Mike’s lap so that she’s straddling his thighs, her hands coming up to link behind his neck, his hands going to her hips. “Is that so?” she asks, leaning forward to press the ghost of a kiss against his lips. Butterfly wings flap furiously inside her heart and stomach, and the desire in her blood feels like it’s too hot to stay contained. Mike shivers at the touch of her lips to his and El grins, internally crowing at the victory. “Why don’t you show me?” Her voice is pitched high with breathiness, almost desperate despite the teasing, and Mike responds by gripping her hips just that much tighter, pulling her even closer against him, like he will never be able to be close enough.

“Hmm, maybe I will,” he says, head ducking to press a soft, suckling kiss to her neck, just under the corner of her jaw, making El gasp as she tilts her head to give him better access. Mike begins trailing kisses down the length of her neck, one hand coming up to tease the strap of the camisole she’s wearing. His fingers wrap around it and pull it down off her shoulder as his mouth makes its way to her collarbone, hot and firm and just *oh god*.

Wearing too many clothes. It’s as coherent a thought as El can manage as her hands slide down from Mike’s shoulders to grab at the hem of her camisole. She forces Mike’s mouth away from her skin as her arms come up and over her head, shaking her hair free as she drops the discarded item of clothing behind her where it lands on the floor.

El looks at Mike, gasping at the hungry way he’s looking at her, eyes raking over her. She’s naked from the waist up and every inch of her skin shivers with warm tingling as he looks at her, devouring her with his gaze. Warmth pools inside of her, heavy and dizzying, making her feel languid and loose.

Mike looks back into her eyes, his own eyes dark and intent, before he kisses her with such suddenness, it steals her breath. When she gets her breath back, El moans into the kiss, his mouth hot on hers, lips eager and demanding. El gives as good as she gets, her mouth opening up beneath him, teasing him with her tongue, drawing a deep groan from him as he responds in kind. El shifts her hips against his, causing both of them to gasp and moan.

One of Mike's hands slides up from her hip to span across the middle of her back, palm hot against her skin, as his mouth leaves hers to once again press suckling kisses against her skin. El leans back into his touch, letting Mike support her weight, her back arching as she offers herself to him. She squirms and gasps as Mike drags his lips over her collarbone, down her chest, and lower still, across the upper curve of her breast. Anticipation builds, eagerness alighting in her veins, and El moans, Mike's mouth an inch from where she desperately wants it – so close, but so far, *almost there* and-

-the doorbell rings.

Both Mike and El groan, twin sounds of frustration. "Go away," Mike murmurs against her skin. After a beat, his mouth resumes its journey, picking up where he left off, interruption fading like it never happened.

But the doorbell rings again and Mike pulls away from her with a huff, head falling to land with a thump against the back of the couch. El sighs, but she's giggling as she twists, bending back to grab her camisole off the floor.

"Sorry," she says wryly, squirming a bit to maintain her balance, to Mike's not-so-amused groan.

"You're not helping, you know," Mike says, voice tight and stressed.

El giggles as she swings off of his lap, missing the feel of him beneath her immediately and slides her camisole back on. "You'll be fine," she says, standing up.

Mike lets out a humorless laugh. "I don't know. I could be hideously disfigured. You never know."

El snorts on her way over to the door. “Sexual frustration isn’t going to disfigure you,” she says over her shoulder.

El opens the door, still smiling as she focuses past the door, seeing who’s interrupting her soon-to-not-be-quiet night with her boyfriend.

And then she sees who’s standing on her front step and her mouth drops open with shock.

“Kali?”

She’s run out of options.

Actually, if she’s being honest with herself, she ran out of options a long time ago.

There’s nowhere left for her to go, no one left for her to turn to. She has nothing. She *feels* like nothing.

Dottie – long dead.

Funshine – killed by a cop last year up in Washington State.

Mick – disappeared into the night without a trace in Denver.

Axel – stormed off a couple of months ago in Austin, saying he was out before she got him killed or worse.

Now it’s just Kali, all alone. There’s no more revenge to get. No one left to kill.

And she’s tired, so *very* tired. Tired of running, tired of fighting, tired of being alone, of being strong. Can’t she just rest? Hasn’t she earned that at the very least?

Only 26 years old and she’s old, broken, lost.

But there is one place left for her to turn, one person she hasn’t tried.

Jane – no, not Jane, *El*. The name she insisted on being called by, the name that boy gave her. *Don't call her Jane. She won't like it – won't help you if you do.*

And Kali's never been so terrified.

It wasn't too hard to find El. Hawkins is a small town. Easy to find out who the police chief is, easier from there to find where El Hopper is living now.

In Chicago, irony of ironies. It's almost enough to make her laugh.

The night chill is just beginning to settle in Kali's limbs as she stands on the sidewalk, toes lined up with the start of the path up to the front door of a non-descript townhouse.

It's...quaint. Homey and unassuming and *normal*. It's nothing like Kali has ever experienced and she *craves* so bad for something she's never had before. It swirls in her stomach, aching and nauseating, until she's practically trembling.

It's the hardest thing she's ever done, taking that first step up the walkway. But once she does, she could sooner turn off gravity than keep her feet from carrying her to the door. Despite her fear, despite the *what if she turns me away*, despite *everything*.

Kali rings the doorbell once, and then a second time. She can feel El just on the other side, like a sixth sense, an extension of herself.

And when the door opens maybe a minute later, Kali freezes, shock stealing her breath. The last time she saw El was 5 years ago and she'd still been just a girl, transitioning into adulthood. But now....

She's all grown up.

Long, rich brown hair, gently curled in gorgeous waves, ends brushing the bottom of her ribcage. Svelte curves and soft skin, the roundness of childhood long since burned away, leaving the shape of a woman behind. Wide, brown eyes, full lips, flushed cheeks. Dressed for a night in, simple white camisole and pale yellow pajama pants. And that's when Kali notices it. The flavor of the flush across El's cheeks, the lips, teased into a rich smile, that are a little too full – a

bit swollen – the mussed hair.

Kali's interrupted something, a private, intimate moment. *Oh no.*

Then the smile on El's face fades as she looks at Kali, her mouth dropping open in shock. "Kali?" And Kali knows it's too late to turn around.

But everything gets stuck in her throat – her words, her emotions, her tears – and Kali wraps her arms around herself, feeling small and vulnerable. "I didn't know where else to go," she forces out, the words sapping all her strength, leaving a rush of exhaustion in their wake. It's as if voicing the words that have been circling around in her head is an admission of failure, the realization of hitting rock bottom. But it's also relieving, like she doesn't have to hide from it any more.

For a moment, El's frozen and Kali can't blame her, really. She'd be surprised, too, if a long lost sister popped up out of nowhere. But, to El's credit, she gathers herself quickly. "How did you find me?" The words are harsh, guarded. Again, only fair.

Kali smiles, but there's no humor in the expression. "Not hard if you know how to look. Not many do, in case you're wondering."

El's lips twitch in what Kali can only call a polite smile. "What are you doing here, Kali?"

Kali's face falls and she feels the familiar sting of tears at the corners of her eyes. "I need help," she says, feeling more vulnerable than she's ever felt in her entire life. Her voice is shaking, thick with unshed tears, like a small child's.

As Kali watches, El closes her eyes, like she's trying to decide what to do. But, a few seconds later, she takes in a deep breath and opens her eyes. "Come in, Kali. Please." El steps aside, letting Kali inside. Kali feels like El's letting her into her life and tries not to cry, but a couple of tears escape down her cheek to land at the corner of her mouth.

Kali steps over the threshold and takes a cautious look around. The townhouse is warm and homey, full of gently used, if mismatched,

furniture. Dining room off to her right, table cleared off and ready to be used; l-shaped staircase directly in front of her leading upstairs; living/family room off to the left. Kali's eyes widen a bit as she spots a tall, dark-haired man on the couch. She recognizes him – the boy who gave El her name. No longer a boy, but a man full grown – strong jaw, sharp cheekbones, artfully messy hair, all tall and lean limbed.

He's looking back at her with a combination of worry and annoyance, the latter because of the interrupted evening – his cheeks are flushed as well, clothing rumpled, and *so, this is awkward* – but the former carves a pit into the bottom of her stomach. Because it's not worry for him, it's worry for *El*, so apparent by the way he glances back and forth between the two of them, the small frown on his face. He's scared of the damage Kali might leave in her wake and what hurts the most is that it's a completely valid fear.

"El?" he asks, slowly rising to his feet, his full height stretching up over a foot taller than her own.

El smiles, but it's tight, a polite gesture and nothing more. Kali's never felt more like an intruder. "Mike, you remember Kali, right?"

Mike – *yes, that's what his name was* – gives a small, awkward wave and slowly steps towards them. "I remember," he says, voice flat, just as guarded as El's was earlier.

"She needs our help," El says, looking at him pointedly.

Mike stares back and Kali might as well not even be there, the way they have a conversation just by looking at each other. Then again, given El's powers....

After a moment, Mike sighs, eyes filling with worried acceptance. "I'll set up the futon in the guest room."

El smiles, all gratitude and apology, and closes the distance between the two of them, rising up on her toes, face tilting up. Mike leans down as if on reflex, bending over her so she can press her lips to his. The kiss is sweet and rich, a little heated at the edges, a lifetime of love and feelings and shared experiences in the simple motion. It

almost makes Kali uncomfortable, just how *full* the kiss is. But El lowers back down to her feet a few moments later, all soft smiles and gentle eyes. “Thank you,” she says, the words spoken with the weight of a million meanings.

Mike leans forward and presses a quick kiss to El’s forehead. “Anytime,” he says before he disappears upstairs, presumably to work on getting things ready for Kali to stay.

El turns back and looks at Kali with a cautiously worried look on her face – brow furrowing just so, lips pulled down a fraction. “Would you like something to drink? Water? Tea? I think we have some Earl Grey and Oolong?”

Kali just stares, just unable to process anything from the last few minutes. She and El are cut from the same, traumatic cloth: raised by a madman, experimented on in callous captivity, each of them finally making their escape when it got to be too much, unequipped for life on the outside.

So how did El end up so *whole*? She has a life – a comfortable home, a man who loves her with every fiber of his being, security and purpose and the ability to help someone as broken as her, able to offer something as simple as tea – like it’s normal, like it’s something she can do without second thought.

Like she found her way through to happy.

And it’s too much. The deepest kind of envy fills Kali, an overwhelming sadness that everything El has seems so very out of reach for Kali. She wants this, wants this so badly it hurts – this sense of belonging, of surety, of *calm*.

It’s everything Kali’s ever wanted but has never been able to grasp. And it hurts so much she can’t help what happens next.

She bursts into tears.

Embarrassed, Kali brings her hands up to her face, like she can hide the way her body wracks with sobs, the sounds that are ripped from her throat. Her tears are suffocating, painful, overwhelming.

Moments later, Kali feels a slim pair of arms encircle her shoulders and Kali latches on for dear life, long past shame as she drowns.

Kali grieves in El's arms – for the life she lost, for the life she could have had, for the unknown ahead of her, for all the things she wants that she'll never get.

And, all the while, El holds her close, a calm port in a chaotic storm. And Kali *knows* she'll never be able to pay El back for this simple kindness.

Doesn't mean she won't try.

Mike waits upstairs for El. It's been almost an hour since Kali showed up at their doorstep (looking so much smaller than Mike remembered, too), almost nearly as long since Mike went back downstairs, clean sheets in hand for the guest room, to see Kali sobbing in El's arms, head buried against El's shoulder, looking small and lost.

In that instant, all of Mike's fearful worry leaves him, but unease still remains as he sets up the guest room, taking the form of worry for how El is going to handle whatever might come in the next few days. He remembers, very clearly, the first time he met Kali, back in the Void, when El wanted to tell her sister that Brenner was dead. He remembers Kali's cold anger, the way El cried in his arms after, the melancholy that clung to her for days following.

Mike doesn't want any of that to happen again. And he will do anything to protect El's happiness, to keep her from being sad. *Especially* after everything he put her through after his car accident.

So, Mike waits. He's dressed for bed, book lying open in his hands, but he's barely reading it. He's managed maybe only 10 pages when El comes upstairs and the book is completely forgotten as all his attention focuses on her, like she's a supernova and he's caught in her gravity well.

El's shoulders are slumped just a bit, her face pinched with exhaustion and worry, and she shuffles over to the bed after closing the door behind her, practically throwing herself down on the mattress.

"Hey," Mike says, low and quiet, reaching out for her, pulling her into his embrace. His heart doesn't fail to skip its normal beat as she snuggles into his chest, palms pressing against his ribcage, her touch warm through his thin t-shirt. "How is she?"

El shakes her head against him, almost nuzzling him in the process. "I don't know," she says, sighing. "Lost, sad, confused. Don't know how to help her."

Mike holds her tighter, cheek pressing against her hair. "You should call Hop in the morning," he murmurs. "He'll know what to do."

El lets out a noise that's part sigh, part whimper. "Good idea," she says. "You always have the best ideas."

Mike can't help himself – he *grins*. "I do," he says, quietly teasing. "And don't you forget it."

There's a bit of shifting as El pulls her head away from his chest and looks up at him. "How did I get so lucky?" she asks, smiling, all starry-eyed and wondrous.

Mike looks down at her, heart twisting at the worry he can see in her eyes, the stress lines that pinch the corners of her eyes, the lines of her jaw. She carries so much with her – the weight of her history, all horrible and traumatic, the love she carries for people, the fears she has. It astounds him and makes him sad and all he wants to do is ease her of her burden. He worries, so much, about the extra weight Kali's appearance is going to pile on. And it makes him want to do something, *anything*, to help her, to make her feel better, to distract her even if for a just a little while.

Mike smiles. "I ask myself that every day," he responds, so in love with her it threatens to make his heart burst. Without waiting for her to respond, Mike ducks his head and kisses her, one hand coming up to thread through her hair, his mouth slanting over hers.

Immediately, every inch of him lights up, blood running hot in his veins, the passion that had been so rudely cut short earlier roaring back to life. El whimpers against his mouth, melting against him, her lips parting beneath his, and Mike groans, the sound of her whimper shooting straight down his spine, leaving shivers in its wake. God, he wants her to make that noise *again*.

Mike slowly rolls them over so he's hovering over her, weight braced on his elbows, as leisurely glides his lips up her jaw, down her neck. His hand slips under her camisole, the skin of her stomach soft and warm beneath his touch, as he pushes the fabric up her body, revealing her to him inch by inch, determined to show her just how much he loves her, determined to make her feel *good*.

El surrenders herself to him as he slowly undresses her, kissing his way across each inch of skin as it's exposed to him, her cries and gasps like music to his ears, her hands clutching at him as she gives all of herself.

Mike pours everything he is into making love to her, first with his mouth and hands, then with the rest of him – he knows her body almost better than he knows his own, knows how to make her gasp and moan and writhe beneath him until she's nothing more than pure sensation, his own pleasure almost unimportant in his desire to give her *everything*. (*he thinks, sometimes, that he could subsist on nothing but her, his senses overwhelmed by her as she arches against him, underneath him.*)

After, she lies sated and boneless beneath him and he buries his face in the crook of her neck, his heart pounding as he comes down from his high, all spent passion and breathless satisfaction. He holds her close as they eventually fall asleep, her murmured "I love you" tattooed across his heart.

He may not know what the morning is going to bring. But, no matter what, they'll always have this – the love they share, the feel of being in each other's arms, of being whole and happy.

And he will do anything to give her this every moment of every day for the rest of their lives.

Kali wakes to the scents of cooked breakfast – savory, greasy, rich, the hint of coffee around the edges, delicious enough to make her stomach roar and rumble. How long has it been since she’s eaten? *Not good that she can’t remember.*

Slowly, Kali sits up in bed, feeling the sleep still lingering in her limbs. She slept deeply – *really* deeply. It’s been she doesn’t know how long since she slept so soundly and totally. And her body craves more, the pillows beckoning. It would be so easy to lay back down and slip into blissful unconsciousness once more.

But those smells...

Kali’s mouth waters as she pushes up onto her feet, swaying a little as the last bits of sleep pull dizzily at her body. But she pushes past it and slips silently out the door to the bedroom. She makes a quick pit stop at the bathroom that’s just a door over before she pads out to the kitchen, peering around the corner.

Mike and El are standing in the kitchen, both of them working at getting breakfast together. Mike plates what looks like scrambled eggs and toast while El stands at the stove, pushing something around with a spatula. As Kali watches, Mike goes to stand behind El, arms wrapping around her waist as he leans down to press a soft kiss against her neck, murmuring something all the while. El leans back as far as she can given the task in front of her and giggles, her smile luxuriously soft. It’s easy and intimate, foreign with just how *normal* it is.

But there’s only so long Kali can stand there, hungry and increasingly feeling awkward. So she steps forward and clears her throat. “Good morning,” she says, quietly. Mike and El look at her, breaking apart. “Sorry, didn’t meant to interrupt.”

“No, it’s ok,” El says, the lovesick smile that had been on her face having transformed into something more sedate. It makes the guilt Kali has over intruding deepen, worm further into her veins. Maybe it

was a mistake coming here. But...where else was she going to go?

"We made breakfast," Mike says. "El's just finishing up the bacon. Though, I don't know if you eat bacon. There's eggs and toast already on a plate, if you just want that. Whatever you want, really. Your choice."

Kali pauses, taking in the wordy ramble, spoken a degree too quickly. But before she can say anything, El rolls her eyes and sighs. "Just ignore the word vomit," El says. "He gets like this when he's nervous."

Mike scowls playfully, a bit of levity in an otherwise awkward moment. "Why do I love you?"

El grins and it's like Kali's been forgotten. "Oh, I can think of a few reasons. But I'm sure you don't want me sharing those in front of company."

Company. This is what Kali is, a polite, temporary intrusion on their lives. Even though there's no way she could have hoped for more, it still hurts to hear. "Bacon sounds wonderful," Kali says, bringing herself back to Mike and El's attention. "Thank you for making breakfast. It's been...." Kali trails off, memory rushing in like a punch to the heart. Back with the others, with her gang, there had been camaraderie, shared meals with laughter and smiles. How long has it been since she's had that? How long since she was among friends and loved ones?

Suddenly, it's taking everything Kali has not to cry, her throat sore from swallowing the emotion that rises up. Weak, she feels so *weak* and she glances down at the ground so as not to betray her tear-filled eyes.

A cup of coffee enters her view, a plain white mug filled with black coffee. Startled, Kali looks up to see Mike standing in front of her, holding the mug with the handle free for her to take. "Here, you look like you could use the caffeine." Despite the wariness she can see in the corners of his eyes, in the set of his shoulders, there's a kind smile on Mike's face. He's *trying*, she realizes, and it's way more than she deserves.

“Thank you,” she says, her voice hoarse and whisper thin.

“Why don’t you go sit down? We’ll bring the food out in a minute.”

It feels like if she says anything, she’ll burst into the tears that are constantly threatening to break free, so Kali just nods and turns to sit at the dining room table. There’s three places already set – napkins, silverware – but only one that has no mug next to it. *Her spot.*

Kali pulls out the wooden chair and slides into the seat, the mug cradled between her palms, the heat, almost too hot, anchoring and comforting. She feels the tears subside, but not disappear, as she sips at the coffee, the taste rich and smooth on her tongue.

Turning, Kali watches as Mike and El come over, three plates between them, each filled with eggs, bacon, and toast. Wordlessly, El hands her one of the plates and, for a few long minutes, there’s only the sounds of them eating, a bit awkward, but mostly just fine. Kali watches Mike and El, watches the small smiles they give each other, the occasional caresses and thinks, even if she never gets to experience a fraction of the peace El has, Kali’s happy not everything the Hawkins Lab touched was irreparably broken, happy that El found her way through to a happy ending.

They’re mostly through with breakfast when someone, El, finally speaks up. “So, Kali, I just...why are you here?” Kali startles a bit, caught off guard, and some of it must show on her face because El frowns and rushes to keep speaking. “I want to help you, but...I need to understand.”

Kali looks down at her plate, pushing bits of egg around with the tines of her fork, and sighs. “I don’t know,” she says, feeling small and weak. “I just...I’m tired. Tired of running, tired of fighting, tired of having nowhere where I don’t have to watch over my shoulder all the time.”

“What about the others?” El asks. “Your....?”

Kali smiles, but there’s no joy behind it, only bitterness and sorrow. “My gang, you mean?” Kali closes her eyes. “Gone,” she says. “Dead or missing.” A tear slips out from under one closed eyelid and Kali

rushes to wipe it away. "I'm alone. There's no one left but me."

She looks to see Mike and El looking at each other, a quick, silent conversation passing between their locked gazes, before El looks back at her. "I don't know how to help you, Kali." And, for a moment, Kali's heart falls. "But that doesn't mean I'm not going to try. But, before I do, I need to know. Are you still...?"

Kali knows what El's asking and she lets out a bitter laugh. "Seeking my revenge?" She shakes her head. The deaths of the people she's killed weigh heavy on her heart, but she knows she can never bring herself to regret them even as she's glad it's over. "No, there's no one left to go after. And you took Brenner from me, you and your police chief."

El nods. "Well, good, because that's who I think can help. I don't know what you need, Kali. But I think he can help."

Kali's stomach twists at the thought of law enforcement of any kind. "Like he helped you, you mean?" If there's a whiff of derision in her voice, Kali does nothing to hide it.

But it's clear that both Mike and El heard it and they are not amused. "Hey," Mike says, scowling. "You came to us for help," he says, leaning forward, elbows on the table. "And Hop is one of the best people you could ever meet. You'd only be so lucky to have him help you."

El reaches out and places a calming hand on Mike's arm, but the look on her face is stern as she looks at Kali. "He knew what he was doing when he took me in," El says. "He hid me from the government, gave me a home, raised me as his daughter. And never *once* since taking me in have I ever felt like he might betray me. I know you have issues with cops, but he's not like them, Kali. He's my dad."

There's a frightening storm brewing in El's eyes and Kali gulps, knowing she's on the thinnest of ice. "I'm sorry," she says, going for contrite, hoping she hit it. "I know he's different. But, I—"

"I know," El says, understanding in her eyes. "I was there. I saw." She sighs. "So, if you're ok, I'm going to go give him a call, see what he

says.”

There’s a frisson of distrust that runs through her – old habits die hard, apparently – but Kali nods. “Ok,” she says, casting her eyes back down at the table. She hears the scraping of El’s chair against the floor and looks up to see El walking upstairs, leaving just her and Mike at the table.

“She doesn’t take too kindly to people being mean to her family and friends,” Mike says. “So, even though you have cop issues, try to keep them to yourself.” Mike shrugs. “Besides, Hop is, like, the least by-the-book cop ever.”

Kali shrugs. “In my experience, even the ones who don’t go by the book need to be looked out for.”

Mike frowns, something almost like pity creeping into his eyes. Kali hates it, *hates* being seen as weak. It’s bad enough she *feels* it. Mike goes to speak and Kali expects that pity to manifest into kind, simpering words. But it’s not what Mike says. “So, El has telekinesis and telepathy,” he says. “What are your powers?”

The question catches Kali off guard. “You mean El didn’t tell you?”

Mike shrugs one shoulder, lips twitching in a grin. “I never asked,” he says.

Kali can’t help but smile at the boyish look on Mike’s face. It’s endearing and Kali can see why El loves him so much. “I show people illusions,” she says. “Make them see things that aren’t there, or whatever I want.”

She holds out her palm and a miniature dragon sits nestled in her hand, curled up and sleeping and breathing thin streams of fire out of its snout with each breath. The look on Mike’s face, all wondrous and amazed, makes it worth it, helps distract her from the hollowness inside of her. “Wow, that’s cool!” he says, breathing out the words. It’s been a long time since she’s given anyone the simple joy of wonderment with her illusions.

Kali smiles. “It has its uses.”

Mike grins. "I bet." He glances up towards the stairs, like he's checking to see if El's coming back down, and when he looks back at Kali, the look on his face is serious. "Don't hurt her," he says, voice quiet. "She'll never tell you this, but she'd do almost anything to help you. And, if you take advantage of that, if you hurt her...."

The warning in Mike's voice is clear and, though there's little Mike could do to her, Kali takes the warning in the spirit in which it was given. She nods, sighing deeply. "I didn't come here to hurt her," she says. "I've never wanted to hurt her."

Mike nods. "Good. Just make sure to keep it that way."

A silence falls over them and, this time, it makes Kali squirm and she stands up in a rush. "Here, let me clear the table," she says, a bit faster than normal. "You were both so kind in making me breakfast, it's the least I can do."

Kali grabs her plate and El's before Mike can say anything, shuffling over to the kitchen to put the plates in the sink. She doesn't know how Mike and El handle dishes, but this feels like the least offensive place to leave them. Mike ends up helping her, anyway, and by the time they're just about finished, El's coming back downstairs, a small, if determined, smile on her face. "We should pack a bag," she says. "Hop's expecting us for dinner."

"What time did she say they'd be here?"

Jim tears his gaze away from the darkening sky to look over at his wife. Joyce stands by the arm of the porch swing, sweater wrapped around her frame. He can't help the way he smiles as he looks at her – every day, he falls more in love with her, he swears – before he looks back out at the growing twilight, gently swinging back and forth on the porch swing. "They left Chicago around 2 in the afternoon. Should be here by 5:30," Jim says, looking at his watch. It's quarter after 5, now. "So, soon."

Joyce crosses in front of him to sit down next to him, snuggling into his side. "How are we gonna help this girl? What was her name again?"

"Kali," Jim says. And how to help her has been the only thing he's been thinking about since El called that morning, asking him to help her help this young woman, her *sister*.

The one she met the first time she went to Chicago.

Jim thinks back to his conversation with El only a handful of hours ago, thinks of the way El asked for his help. "She's my sister, Dad," El had said. "I *need* to help her. She doesn't have anyone else. Please, I don't know what to do."

The days of El needing him for everything are long gone and, though he's glad El's grown into an independent young woman who can stand on her own, there's part of Jim that longs for those days. He misses her, he's not afraid to admit, and he will always be there for whatever she needs. El's his daughter. When she asks for help, when she tells him she needs him, Jim will never, *ever* hesitate.

Even if he's not sure exactly what to do.

Well, he's always been good at playing it by ear.

"We'll figure something out, Joyce," he says after a moment. "I think I just need to talk to this young woman first."

Joyce shakes her head. "Horrible what happened to her, what happened to El," Joyce sighs. "Taken from her family, used for what she can do, kept locked up like an animal. I'm glad he's dead, Jim." Joyce's voice has gotten low, fierce. "I'm glad you killed that man for what he did to those children."

Jim wraps his arm around Joyce, holding her close to him. "I know," he says, kissing her on the crown of her head.

They sit there in silence, snuggled up on the porch swing and, 20 minutes later, a car pulls up the drive. It's one of those Japanese things, a Honda or a Toyota or something, purchased with the insurance payout after Mike's car accident to replace the station

wagon. Jim had pitched in some money, as well Ted and Karen, to help pay for the rest of the car, and it seemed to run ok. *Let's see if he can keep from getting in anymore car accidents*, Jim thinks as he and Joyce stand to greet them.

Jim leans against the railing up the porch steps, watching as the car comes to a stop and the occupants slowly spill out onto the gravel underfoot.

Mike's out of the car first, practically unfolding from the front seat. He's long since stopped growing and has full settled into his 6'3" frame, lean, but no longer gangly – a man grown. He turns and looks at where Jim's standing, a tired smile stretching across his face before he's moving towards Jim, as two of the passenger doors open. "Hey, Hop," Mike says, bounding over to him.

Jim descends the steps and meets Mike at the base. "Hey, kid," he says, pulling Mike into a brief, hard hug. "How was the drive?"

Mike shrugs and he pulls back. "Not bad. At least it's not snowing yet."

A laugh escapes Jim. "There's that."

"Hi, Dad," El says, having gotten out of the car.

The hug that Jim pulls her into is longer than the one for Mike, his arms tight around her as she burrows into him. "Hey, Ellie," he says with a voice full of emotion. God, he missed her.

After a long moment, El pulls away and looks up at him, a small smile on her face. "How's it going, Dad?"

"Pretty good," Jim says. "Can't complain too much."

"Oh, that's not true," Joyce says, "He complains all the time."

El lets out a laugh as Jim rolls his eyes. "Hi, Joyce," El says, going to hug her step-mother.

"Hi, sweetie," Joyce says, the two embracing in a warm hug.

“Hi, Joyce,” Mike echoes, getting his own hug in return a moment later.

Motion out of the corner of Jim’s eye pulls his attention away from the reunions and he looks to see the car’s third occupant.

Short, Indian, hair long on one side, cut short on the other, eye makeup smudged, but still heavy. She has her arms crossed tight over her chest as she looks at him, gaze wary and scared and resigned. Jim sighs and walks over to her, making sure his steps are slow. “You must be Kali,” he says, keeping his arms relaxed, posture open, trying to be open and inviting.

Kali stares up at him, arms resolutely still crossed over her chest. But she nods. “Yes, sir,” she says with a voice that lilts with an accent he can’t place.

Jim snorts. “Please, call me Hop. ‘Sir’ reminds me of my father. No fucking thank you.”

The way Kali jumps at that, the way she looks like she wants to run or fight but can’t decide which, breaks Jim’s heart. *There but for the grace of God*, he thinks, suddenly very sad.

This could have been El, could so have easily been – lost, untrusting, so full of hurt.

But, Jim just smiles. “Hey, did you want to come in? I can’t claim Joyce is the best cook, but she does alright.”

“Hey!” Joyce says, marching over. “Jim Hopper, you better be careful or you’re sleeping on the couch tonight.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Jim says, smirking, winking over at Kali who’s looking at him and Joyce with a mixture of confusion and amusement.

Joyce scoffs before she looks at Kali, her face melting into a warm, welcoming expression. “Hi, Kali. I’m Joyce. Why don’t you come in? Any family of El’s is always welcome here,” Joyce says as she reaches out to take Kali by the arm, gently leading the young woman towards the stairs. Jim catches a flash of the stunned look on Kali’s face, like she never expected to be mothered and fussed over ever again and

doesn't know how to feel about it.

As Joyce leads Kali inside, Jim turns to see El and Mike grabbing their things from the trunk, smiling at each other as they talk, their words too low to hear, but the tone is teasing and loving. Mike says something that has El rolling her eyes and he laughs as she pokes him in the side, finger jabbing, Mike trying to curve his body away from her seeking finger. As El pulls her hand back, Mike slides over and leans in quickly to steal a kiss, an apology offered.

El kisses him back – apology accepted – and Jim just shakes his head. “Ok, you two, enough making out on my property.”

El pulls back and groans, rolling her eyes good-naturedly. “*Dad*,” she sighs. “We were just kissing.”

“Yeah, that’s how it starts,” Jim says. “C’mon, you two, inside. One of you is probably going to want to help with your dinner. I love Joyce, but a culinary genius she is not.”

“I’ll help,” Mike says.

“No, you drove,” El says. “I got it. Besides, I’m a better cook than you.”

“Not much better,” Mike grumbles, frowning a bit as they all head inside, Jim following the two up the stairs.

Despite the fact that he knows the two will be gone come the morning, Jim’s happy they’re home, happy to have them back even if just overnight.

Dinner is a calm, warm affair – El and Joyce working in the kitchen, Kali hovering nearby, Mike and Jim sitting at the table. And when they all sit down to eat, Jim grabs everyone a beer – when Mike begins to protest, Jim just gives him a look and says, “You’ll be 21 in a few months. And it’s *one* beer and you’re not driving until the morning. It’s *fine*.” There are no protests after that – and he watches the dynamics at the table take over. Mike and El sit close to each other, half having their own private conversation, half interacting with everyone else.

But Jim's really watching Joyce and Kali. Kali's sitting next to Joyce as the older woman engages her in conversation, asking her about where she's from and what her family was like and the places she's been, being such a *mom* about it the entire time, and the look on Kali's face is full of so much emotion – hurt, hope, disbelief, yearning – that it makes Jim's heart hurt just by looking at her.

Jim doesn't say anything, though, content to interact around the edges, watching over his family in peace.

Eventually, though, everyone settles down to sleep – Jim and Joyce in their room, Mike and El in her old bedroom, Kali in the guest room. And Jim finds that sleep is elusive. Joyce's breath is soft against his arm, occasionally drifting into light snoring territory, and the sound is normally calming, but there are some nights where, for whatever reason or another, sleep remains just out of reach.

So, Jim gets up to go downstairs, checking on everyone else as he goes. He peers into El's room, sees the combined body mass of Mike and El buried under the blankets, wrapped up in each other while they sleep. But the door to the guest room is open and a quick peek inside shows it devoid of any guests.

Curious, and maybe a little cautious, Jim goes downstairs. He spots Kali almost immediately – sitting on the couch in the living room, one leg pulled up, knee hugged close to her chest, the other leg folded beneath her. She's not looking at anything in particular, instead staring out into space, looking dazed and lost.

"Couldn't sleep?" Jim asks, making sure to keep his voice soft, not wanting to startle her.

Still, Kali jumps a bit anyway, looking over at him with a bit of panic not unlike a spooked animal before she clamps down on it. "Slept too much last night, not used to getting that much. Hard to sleep when you're on the run."

Jim nods. "Yeah, I bet. Well, I couldn't sleep either, so I was going to make some tea. Never thought it would help until Joyce convinced me to try it a few years ago, but it does sometimes. At least it's nice having something hot to drink. You want some?"

Kali just looks at him for a long moment before she nods. "That sounds wonderful, thank you."

Jim shrugs. "Not like making tea for two is much more work than tea for one. C'mon, you can pick out your tea. Joyce has a bunch."

Jim picks out his normal mint tea, while Kali grabs chamomile, and Jim sets the kettle on the stove. A long silence stretches over them as they wait for the kettle to boil, but Jim eventually speaks. "So, are you still running?"

Kali looks at him from where she's leaning against the counter, confusion furrowing her brow. "Excuse me?"

"You said were on the run, hard to sleep, remember? I wanted to know: are you still running?"

Kali chews on her lip, eyeing him uncertainly in the low light of the kitchen. "Nowhere left to run from, I suppose," she says. "I just...I'm tired."

Jim understands. He knows from what El's told him that Kali has been on a lifelong mission for revenge against the people that took her from her family, that held her captive and experimented on her and hurt her – like they did to El. "Revenge can do that. Especially if you run out of people to get revenge on," he says.

Kali shrugs. "Well, you killed Brenner for me, so I suppose I should be thanking you."

Jim scoffs. "Asshole," he breathes. "Would kill him again a thousand times over, what he did to El."

Kali nods and the quick, predatory smile that stretches across her face at Jim's words fades, leaving a small frown in its wake. "I don't know where to go from here. Your wife, Joyce, asked me if any of the places I've been would be somewhere I could settle and I didn't know how to answer." Kali pauses, smiling. "She's a persistent woman, your Joyce. Full of a lot of questions."

Jim smiles. "That she is." An idea hits him, one born from watching Kali and Joyce interact, from knowing the way peace and quiet can

help heal after being so unsettled for so long. The kettle begins to whistle and Jim turns off the stove as he speaks. “Hey, why don’t you stay here a few days? Take some time to figure things out. Joyce would love the company, I’m sure, and it’s quiet out here.”

Kali’s face screws up in a look of disgust. “Stay in Hawkins? Near the lab?”

Jim shrugs as he pours water into mugs. “Lab’s been closed for years, abandoned. No one will bother you out here, I promise. If you want, I got a cabin in the woods that’s sitting empty – it’s where I lived with El before I bought this place. Nice and secluded – secure. Hid out there from the lab for over a year.”

The yearning is back on Kali’s face. “I...that doesn’t sound too bad, I suppose. For a few days, at least.”

Jim grins. “Right, for a few days.”

*(it starts as a few days at first, but it quickly turns into months. kali is a sad, hurt young woman and what she needs is **time**, time to heal, time to think, time to rest. she settles out in jim’s old cabin, gets a job at the library after jim cajoles the librarian, and spends a lot of time in the woods. she bonds with joyce, happy to be mothered just as much as joyce is happy to have someone to dote on. she makes friends with steve, eventually with nancy and jonathan, too, joining them for dinners at their house occasionally, but mostly seeing them when jim and joyce have everyone over.*

kali decides, after several months, that she wants to try and find her own parents back in london. so she saves her money, jim using his connections to get a passport for her, and goes off to try and find her family. she returns a few weeks later, sad and despondent, her parents both dead from a house fire – and joyce welcomes her back with open arms, letting kali cry on her shoulder. kali settles back in to that cabin almost immediately, resumes her job at the library, and becomes part of hawkins, the place she said she would never return to – the place that has, somehow, become her home.)

I need to tell him.

It's a thought that's run through Will's head maybe a thousand times over the last year or so. He's been with Greg for almost three years, now – and living with him for the better part of a year. And it's been *magical*. Dating Greg, falling in love, moving in with him, just *being* with him openly without caring who knows...it's been the best experience of Will's life. He's never felt so close to anyone *ever*.

And Will's keeping the mother of all secrets from him.

Will's never told anyone about what happened to him back in '83 and '84, about the Upside Down, about Hawkins Lab, or El's powers or *any of it*. And he should, he *needs* to. Greg has been a part of his life for 3 years now, has held him through the nightmares, comforted him after or when things are too much. And he's never asked questions, despite the way Will knows he wants to, and while Will is grateful that Greg's never pushed, Will also knows it's completely unfair to Greg to keep him in the dark. Especially since Will wants to spend the rest of his life with Greg and there's just too much history to keep hidden from him forever.

So, Will isn't surprised when the thought surfaces again. He's had the thought on a regular enough basis that it pops into his head almost like clockwork. But, right at this moment, it's particularly annoying.

Because Greg is kissing him with such promise, all heat and love, tasting like the wine they had at dinner. It was Will's birthday a couple of days ago, the big 2-1, and earlier this evening, Greg took Will out to dinner to celebrate, just the two of them. They shared a bottle of wine and Will feels a little light-headed and tipsy, but he's not sure how much of that is from the wine and how much is from the man who's kissing him like he never wants to stop.

So Will really doesn't need a reminder of how much he needs to tell Greg everything right at this very moment.

"You're doing it again," Greg says as he trails his lips from Will's, pressing small kisses along Will's jaw, up towards his ear.

“Doing what?” Will asks as he starts pushing Greg in the direction of their bedroom.

“Spacing out on me. What’s going on in that brain of yours?” Greg asks, tugging a bit on Will’s earlobe with his teeth, wrenching a thick gasp from Will’s throat.

“Just thinking about how much I love you,” Will says. It’s the truth, but not the *entire* truth. And he tries to distract Greg by slipping his hands under Greg’s shirt, the feel of warm skin hot against Will’s palms.

“Mmm, likely story,” Greg says, a soft laugh escaping his throat.

And, for a while, there’s no more talking as they undress each other, falling into bed with the headiest sense of urgency, all passion and love and need.

After, Will curls up against Greg, arms wrapped around him as Greg pillows his head on Will’s shoulder. As Greg falls asleep, Will can’t keep himself from thinking about what Greg said earlier. *You’re doing it again.* And Will knows, really knows, that it’s time. It’s time to tell Greg about everything.

But Will knows he can’t do it alone.

“You want to what, now?”

The look on El’s face is almost comical in how cute it is – all adorably confused. And, normally, Will would smile and tease her, but the anxiety that’s running through him is too much right now – he’s too nervous and he needs her help so bad.

“I want to tell Greg about the Upside Down, about *everything*.” They’re at a coffee shop they both like, seated with drinks cradled in between their palms. Will chews on his lower lip as he looks down at the table. “I want you there with me, when I tell him. He’s not going to believe unless he has proof. And I *need* to tell him, El. I can’t keep

hiding this from him.” He takes in a deep breath. “I love him and he deserves to know.”

El reaches across the table and lays her hand on his forearm, her palm warm from the heat of her mug. “I know, I know.”

“And I wanted to ask since it’ll affect you just as much, me telling him. I wanted to make sure you’re ok with him knowing.”

Will looks up to see El smiling, understanding radiating from her. “Do you trust him?”

There’s no question. “I do,” Will says, without hesitation. “I’m more worried about him freaking out on me than doing something to betray me, actually.”

El laughs. “Right, how often do people hear about interdimensional monsters and girls with telekinesis?”

“Right?” Will says, grinning wryly. He sighs. “So, you’ll be there when I tell him?”

“Just let me know when,” El says with a nod.

Will gulps. “Yeah, ok. I’ll let you know. Soon, though.” And isn’t that just the scariest thing?

Will’s ready to tell Greg, though...he thinks. And Will also knows that he’ll feel better for saying something, for finally confessing everything, for finally letting Greg all the way in. He won’t have to hide it anymore; the rest of the Party won’t have to carefully sensor their words; El won’t have to be on her guard, careful not to use her powers whenever Greg hangs out with them, which is more and more often these days as Greg and Will’s lives further and further intertwine.

Still doesn’t mean Will’s not scared, though.

He just hopes, in the end, Greg understands.

Greg knows something is up well before Will says he has something he wants to tell him.

Greg's not stupid. He knows there are things Will's hiding from him, has *been* hiding from him. The things that haunt his nightmares, the way he flinches at the first snow of the season, the guarded way him and the rest of his friends talk about home, about that small town in Indiana. Yeah, Greg knows Will's keeping things from him. But Greg also loves Will enough to know that it's because he's not ready.

This isn't to say that Greg hasn't wondered about what happened, about what's so bad that Will feels like he can't share it with him yet. This also isn't to say that Greg doesn't worry about Will. Will's the most amazing person he's ever met in his entire life – bubbly and kind and witty and so beautiful, it makes Greg's heart hurt – and the thought of something *that bad* happening to him just wrenches at every heartstring he has.

But Greg also knows that things take time and he's willing to give Will as much time as he needs to feel ready. Greg knows what it is to keep secrets out of fear, out of not being ready to share.

So when Will reaches for him across the table while they're having breakfast on a lazy Sunday morning, and says, "Hey, so, there's something I've been wanting to tell you," Greg's both happy and worried at the same time.

"Yeah, what is it?" Greg asks, as he thinks, *finally*.

Will looks away for half a beat before looking back at Greg, meeting his eyes. "Oh, um, not right now," Will says. "I was thinking of during lunch?"

Greg frowns. "Wait, aren't Mike and El coming over so we can go out to lunch?"

Will nods, looking contrite. "Yeah, but it's...what I want to tell you is partly her story, too. I just wanted to give you a heads up, so you weren't surprised or feeling like we were ambushing you."

Well, now Greg's curiosity is spiking, completely piqued. But there's a deep-seeded fear in Will's eyes that worries him. "Um, yeah, thanks, ok. Is everything ok, though?"

Will nods, smiling a bit. "Yeah, it is now. It's just...I'm scared you're going to look at me differently."

Greg shifts his hand so that he can grab Will's, fingers intertwining. "Never happen," Greg says. "I love you, Will."

Will keeps smiling, but it's clear he's not convinced that Greg's telling the truth...or that what he has to say won't change Greg's mind. "I love you, too."

The rest of the morning passes quickly, if with an awkward air of anxiety. Will's worried and Greg's curious and it's making everything a little tense in a way that they are completely pretending isn't there, even though they both know they're pretending, which ruins the point of pretending.

A little before noon, there's a knock on the door to the apartment and Greg answers it, seeing Mike and El standing on the other side, dressed casually in jeans and sweaters. "Mike, El, come on in," Greg says. "How's it going?"

Mike shrugs. "Alright. You know how it goes."

El gives him a look. "What does that even mean?" she says, grinning.

Mike smiles back at her. "Dunno, just felt like the right thing to say."

Greg chuckles. He likes Mike and El *a lot*. They're sickeningly all over each other and just so in love everyone in a 5 mile radius knows it. It's completely and amazingly romantic and they're just the nicest, most welcoming people Greg's ever met. El immediately adopts him into the family, despite the secrets Greg knows everyone's keeping from him. Mike doesn't even seem to care that Greg's gay, like it's just a part of who Greg is – that kind of acceptance is rare, in Greg's experience, and it's so refreshing. Plus, Mike is Will's best friend and Greg likes to think that knowing and understanding Mike Wheeler is an important part of knowing and understanding Will.

“Well, yes, I do know how it goes,” Greg says, smiling. “Whatever that means.”

Will comes out to the living room from bedroom and lets out a breath. “Oh, you guys are here. Good. So, I was thinking we could talk before we eat? Just to get it out of the way. And, besides, I’m going to want a drink afterwards and I-”

El goes over to Will and cuts Will off by placing her hands on his shoulders. “Will, *breathe*.”

Mike lets out a laugh. “Yeah, man, you’re starting to sound like me.”

“I know, I’m sorry. It’s just...” Will trails off as he looks at Greg and Greg can see just how *scared* Will is.

So Greg goes over and grabs Will by the hand, squeezing gently. “Why don’t we sit down and talk, yeah?”

Will nods, the motion a little manic and jumpy. “Yeah, good idea.”

Greg guides them all over to couch and chairs in the living room, Mike sitting in one of the armchairs while the rest of them sit on the couch, Will in the middle, facing Greg, El sitting on Will’s other side with her hand on his shoulder, calm and reassuring.

“Right,” Will says. “So I wanted to tell you about something that happened a long time ago. And it’s going to sound fantastical, unreal. But, I swear, it happened.” Will takes in a deep breath, gulping. “Let me start by telling you what happened when I disappeared in 1983.”

And, as Greg listens, increasingly incredulous, Will tells him *everything* – about a place called the Upside Down, a different dimension full of death and monstrous creatures; about how he got stuck in there for a week; about how he was saved; about how he stayed connected to this horrendous place and had his body invaded by a creature called the Mind Flayer; about the government lab where it all began; about the experiments they did on children with abilities, with *powers*, how that managed to open up a tear into this other dimension.

It goes on for a while, Greg saying nothing as Will talks. And, when

Will's done, his voice hoarse, he looks at Greg, concern written over every inch of him. "Greg, you ok?"

Greg blinks. He doesn't know *what* to think. It sounds made up, like a complete and horrific fantasy. And it's what he would have thought, except for the way Will, Mike, and El look like it's completely, deathly serious. "I...wait," Greg says. "What?"

Will sighs, turning to look at El. "Would you show him? Please?"

Show him what? But, before Greg can ask, the coffee table lifts up, hovering two feet above the floor. Greg gapes. "How in the...?"

"I'm doing it," El says. "I was one of those children in the lab. It was my powers that opened the gate, the tear." And, with the table still floating, El reaches across Will and pushes aside the bracelet on her left wrist. "Go on, you can look."

Greg looks at El's face, a long hard, *searching* look, before he grabs El's hand and leans over. There, on the inside of her wrist, a small tattoo. 011. He's reminded, in a sickening bit of association, of the numbers inscribed on the inside of his grandmother's arm, a reminder of the Holocaust. "Eleven," he says, finger ghosting over the tattoo.

"It was her name," Mike said. "It's where we got 'El'."

El smiles. "No, that's where *you* got 'El'."

Mike returns the smile. "True."

Greg lets go of El's hand and looks back at Will. "So, you were...stuck in this horrible place? Hunted by this creature?" Greg lets out a breath. "Your nightmares. This is what you dream about."

Will looks pale and Greg wants to reach over and hug him, but he doesn't. "Yeah," Will says. "Especially around the anniversary."

"November," Greg says. "Your nightmares are always worse in November."

Will nods, but doesn't say anything.

Out of the corner of his eye, Greg sees El get to her feet, Mike following suit. “We’ll give you two sometime to talk.”

El leads Mike into the kitchen, just enough out of earshot. And, when they’re far enough away, Will sighs. “Are...are you ok with all of this?”

Greg frowns, thinking. His immediate answer is *no, no he’s not ok*. His boyfriend just told him he was trapped in a hell dimension for a week, while his boyfriend’s sister just made the coffee table float with *her mind*, and *holy shit*.

But Will’s looking at him like his whole life depends on what Greg says next. So, Greg sighs. “I...think I can be,” he says. “It’s a lot, Will. And I don’t know how long it’ll take to wrap my head around all of it.”

Will lets out a laugh, dry and completely humorless. “Trust me, I can relate. You didn’t have to live through it.”

Greg nods, thinking. “This is the secret you and all your friends carry with you, isn’t it? The thing you hide from everyone else?”

Will nods. “Yeah, it is. Stuff like that tends to form lifelong bonds when you experience it at 13.”

13. *Jesus*. 13-years old and having to fight for his life, having to live through that trauma. It makes Greg unspeakably sad. Because he knows Will is telling the truth. And it’s *horrifying*. “I’m sorry,” Greg says, quiet.

Will shrugs. “It was a while ago.”

“There’s no time limit on trauma, Will,” Greg says, reaching over to take Will’s hand.

Will looks down at their joined hands for a brief second before lifting his head, eyes shining. “You’re not mad at me?”

“What for?” Greg asks.

“For not telling you sooner?”

Greg smiles and doesn't say anything as he leans over and kisses Will, slow and sweet and soft – a reassuring, grounding kiss, affirming and comforting. “I understand,” Greg says. “I’m not mad. I won’t promise it won’t take time for me to adjust – I mean, interdimensional hell monsters? – but I could never be mad at you, Will. I love you.”

Will lets out a sob and, suddenly, they’re kissing again, harder than before, Will all overjoyed with relief so palpable, even Greg feels it. The kiss comes to an end and Greg smiles. “Hey, how about we go get lunch? I think I feel you on that drink.”

Will snorts. “Yeah, the Upside Down makes *anyone* want to dive for the nearest bottle.”

The casual gallows humor, more than anything, makes Greg believe Will’s story 100%; it’s too automatic, too ingrained, too routine. It’s also the most open Will’s been about *anything*, like he doesn’t have any to hide anymore and it’s *freeing*. “Well, then, let’s get going.”

With Mike and El, the four of them head out for lunch, Mike and El sharing her glass of wine when the server’s not looking as Mike’s still a couple weeks away from being 21, the four of them talking and eating. Greg’s never felt more like he belongs with this group, like that last barrier has fallen and he’s finally in all the way, like he’s finally *one of them*.

And he knows it’s not going to be easy, adjusting to this new knowledge (*it won’t. there will be panic attacks and arguments and denials and greg will almost spill the beans to the wrong person more than once. but he’ll learn and grow and it will become part of him like it became part of the rest of them*).

But, the things that matter haven’t changed. Greg loves Will and Will loves him, too, and they’re together. There’s just no more secrets between them anymore.

And, at the end of the day, Greg can’t regret that.

It's a beautiful May Saturday afternoon as El walks home from the grocery store. Mike's halfway through a shift at the library and El's taking the time to run a handful of errands before she goes home to just relax. Finals are over, summer's upon them, and it's amazingly freeing.

El's thinking about what she's going to do with her free time after she gets home – take a long bath or read? Hmm, decisions, decisions... – when she walks past the alley only five minutes away from home-

-and hears the plaintive sounds of tiny, tiny squeaking.

El stops, a grocery bag in each hand, and turns to look into the alley. It's shaded, kind of dark, but not ominously. Or, at least, not to El. But, when you're telekinetic and have fought monsters from other dimensions, not much scares you anymore.

So El doesn't hesitate as she heads into the alley, looking for the source of the squeaking. She sets her bags down on the ground, far enough away from where a pile of garbage and cardboard sits, and uses her powers to begin sifting through to find the source of the noise. *Something might be hurt*, she thinks.

It doesn't take her long to find it.

In a cardboard box near the back of the pile, the cardboard stained and a little damp, are two very small kittens, one ginger, the other white with black patches. And El's heart just *melts*.

"Oh," she breathes, mouth dropping open just a bit, overwhelmed by the cuteness. They're so *small*, squirmy and uncoordinated, eyes barely open. But their fur's matted, and they're mewling sadly, like they're hungry or cold or just missing something.

"Oh, no," El says, crouching down on the ground to peer into the box. "Where's your mommy, little guys?" Biting her lip, El looks around, looking for another cat or *something*.

But there's no mommy cat in sight and El can't just *leave* them here. So she does the only thing she can do: she scoops them up out of the

box, gently and one at a time, cradling them in her arms. They squirm against her, burrowing into the curve of her elbow, against her shirt, all warm and needy.

El hurries to grab her groceries, using her powers to help her hold the bags in one hand, and rushes off to home with only one thought.

She needs to call Dustin.

When Dustin picks up the phone, El's voice on the other end of the line, it only takes him hearing the words "kittens" and "help" before he's practically rushing out the door, car keys in hand, to make the short drive over to the townhouse that Mike and El share. Mike's car is gone – *right, he has work today* – but Dustin makes sure to park in front of Mike's usual spot for when he eventually gets home.

Dustin's barely rang the doorbell when the door opens, a worried El standing on the other side. Dustin smiles. "You said something about kittens?"

El nods and drags him inside, her hand wrapped around his forearm. "This way."

"Geeze, I'm coming, I'm coming," Dustin says, smirking. "You're bossy, you know that? Does Mike like it when you're bossy?" A pause. "Wait, don't tell me. I don't need to know any more than I already do about what you guys get up to in the bedroom."

El heaves a sigh as she pulls him towards the couch. "*Dustin*," she groans. "Not the time. Look, I found them in an alley. And I don't know where their mom is, but I couldn't leave them."

Dustin looks down at the couch, where El built a small bed made of towels. And, in the middle, are two, tiny kittens. Gingerly, Dustin sits down on the couch, unable to keep from smiling. "Hi, little guys," he says, reaching for the white and black one. "Or, girl, in this case," he says a beat later. "Aren't you adorable?"

They are very cute, there's no denying. 3, maybe 4 weeks old, eyes just opening, all shaky and uncoordinated like a pair of drunkards. But they're also dirty and probably hungry. *Probably abandoned by their mother.* "Do you have milk?" Dustin asks, looking over at where El's sitting on the other end of the couch. "And a dish towel? I'm not sure if they're weaned yet, so we're gonna want to warm the milk up and soak the towel in it so they can suckle. And then, we're gonna give them a bath."

El nods. "Ok, I can do that," she says before she rushes off towards the kitchen.

It's a messy affair, feeding the kittens, milk getting all over their hands and the kittens themselves, but they manage after a while, the kittens growing sleepy, bellies full.

"Right, bath time," Dustin says. "C'mon, let's take them into the bathroom, use the sink." Dustin cradles the ginger kitten while El holds the white and black one. And he keeps holding the ginger kitten while El uses dish soap and warm, running water to give the white and black one a bath, following Dustin's instructions.

The kitten squirms, letting out little mews and squeaks at her discomfort, but El lets out soothing, shushing noises. "Hey, it's ok, little one," she says, softly, her fingers moving in gentle circles to rub soap and water into the fur. "Not much longer, I promise."

Dustin smiles as he watches El, listens to her caring words. He can see her, years in the future, baby cradled in her arms, speaking in the same tone, using very similar words. *She's going to make a great mom someday.* "So, uh, you have names picked out?"

El looks over at him as she wraps the kitten, now clean, in a hand towel to start drying her off. "Names?"

"Well, you're keeping them, right?" Dustin asks. He levels a look at her. "El, you have to keep them. You found them!"

El frowns, concerned. "I've never had a pet before."

Dustin absently strokes the ginger kitten as he talks. "You'll be fine.

Cats are pretty easy. They have no problem letting you know when they want something. Besides,” he says, pausing to hold up the ginger kitten, still in need of a bath, but so, so cute. “How could you turn this little face away?”

El smiles, but there’s still uncertainty behind the expression. “Why don’t you take them? You’ve had cats before.”

Dustin shakes his head. “No can do, Ellie. My landlord doesn’t allow pets. So, you better start thinking of names.”

El looks down at the kitten she’s holding, wrapped in a towel as she gently dries it off. “They are pretty cute.” She sighs. “Will you help me?”

Dustin smiles, grin so wide it almost hurts. “Of course I will. Let’s start by getting this little guy clean and then we’ll go grab some things for them. There’s an animal shelter nearby that should be able to help us figure out how to feed them better than a dish towel.”

El nods. “Ok, sounds good.” She pauses, giggling. “God, I wonder what Mike’s gonna think of this....”

When Mike finally arrives home and pulls up to his normal spot, he looks in confusion as he spots Dustin’s car parked a bit further up the street. “What the...?”

It’s this confusion that carries him inside, all brow furrowing and frowning. “Dustin? El?” he calls out as he walks through the front door.

“In here,” El calls back from the living room.

Mike shuts the door and looks over to see Dustin and El sitting on the floor, rug underneath them. It’s only when he gets closer that he sees the other occupants of the room: two small kittens, sleepy and squirmy, one in each of Dustin and El’s laps. Wordlessly, Mike sits down on the ground, legs folded in front of him. “Um, guys? What’s

this?”

El smiles, holding out the ginger kitten. “Mike, meet Peanut.”

Mike hurries to take the kitten from El’s insistent hands. “Peanut?” he asks, some small part of him melting a bit at the soft warmth in his hands. *God, that’s pretty cute....*

“Yeah, because it’s small? And orange?”

Mike laughs. “Ok. What about the other one?”

“This is Mini-Moo,” Dustin says, proud smile on his face. “Your girlfriend came up with that one all on her own.”

Mini-Moo. White with black patches. “Like a cow?” Mike asks.

El’s still grinning as she nods, looking all happy. “Aren’t they cute?”

Mike smiles. God, they’re keeping these cats, aren’t they? “They’re pretty cute,” he has to admit.

“We’re keeping them, just so you know,” El says.

Mike laughs. “Whatever you say, dear.”

Dustin snorts. “Good man, good man.”

Mike just throws him a look, knowing that he’ll always give in to whatever El wants, but not wanting to be given shit for it just in this moment. “Why do I have the feeling this isn’t the last time you’ll do this?” Mike asks. “Bringing home strays?”

El giggles. “Just following your example.”

Mike scowls. “You weren’t a stray.”

El leans over and kisses him. “You still brought me home.”

Mike kisses her back, mouth lingering on hers despite the put-upon sigh he hears coming from Dustin. “I’d do it again in a heartbeat,” Mike says after he pulls away. “But it’s still not the same thing.”

“Hmm, it’s kinda similar,” El says.

Mike decides not to argue with her about it, even though it’s really *not* the same thing at all.

(and he’s right. it’s not the last time el brings home strays. there’ll be other cats, and a dog, and even a turtle at one point. and mike will accept each one she brings home. but these two cats will always have special place in their hearts as their first pets, there for when they buy a house and have kids, putting up with having their tails pulled by a couple of toddlers, a few years apart. and, 17 years later when both cats pass away from old age, mike and el’s oldest will insist on having a funeral for each one, the pout on her face so much like her mother’s, leaving no room for disagreement. and mike will cave, just like he does for her mother every time, happily. always.)

Notes for the Chapter:

Only two chapters to go, folks. Strap yourself in. It's gonna be a fluffy, *fluffy* ride....

32. Nov 1992 - May 1, 1993

Notes for the Chapter:

Right, so...this was fast? Like, how did I write 13.5k in three days?

There's no question, really. I know the answer.

I'm dedicating this, as always, to my darling, beautiful EvieSmallwood. My dear, I was so concerned about finishing this in time for your birthday, that I finished this *well* before your birthday. Happy birthday to you, dear heart. I hope you enjoy the early birthday present! I love you. *all the hugs*

Warning: literally the schoompiest, fluffiest thing I've ever written. Seriously, I melted and *cried* while writing this.

Nov 1992 - May 1, 1993

“Oh my god.”

“I know.”

“*Oh my god.*”

“Do you know what this means?”

“Um, yeah, why else would I be showing you this?”

“Mike, this is *huge*.”

“Well, really, it's not-”

“Ugh, you know what I mean.”

“I can't believe you're finally going to do it.”

“C’mon you guys. It’s just an engagement ring. It’s not like it’s the One Ring, or some bullshit like that.”

Mike looks over at Max who’s sitting across from him at his dining room table. “Gee, thanks Mayfield.”

Max shrugs, smiling. “Anytime, Wheeler.” She reaches out and grabs the ring. “It’s a beautiful ring, though, don’t get me wrong. El’s gonna *flip*.” She looks at it for a long moment, smiling softly, before she hands it back to him. “So, when are you gonna do it? You are aware that her birthday was a few weeks ago, right? Prime opportunity, missed.”

With hands that are trembling oh so slightly, Mike reaches out for the ring. He takes a quick glance at it, all shining and glittering, before storing it back away. “Well, considering that it’s *my* birthday tonight, and my birthday comes *after* El’s, yeah, I’m aware.” Mike says, grabbing his half-consumed bottle of beer and taking a quick swig. “If I could have figured out how to propose, then, I would have. And I’m not proposing tonight, not on my birthday. That’s just tacky.”

It’s why everyone’s over. They’re all going out to dinner for Mike’s 22nd birthday and they’re waiting for El to finish up a late shift at the café before they head out. Mike’s almost grateful El had to be out for a little while. It gives him the perfect opportunity to talk to the rest of the Party about, well, the fact that he’s asking El to marry him.

Will leans forward, elbows resting on the table while he rolls his beer bottle in between his hands, looking a little confused. “How long have you had the ring, anyway?”

There’s a black and white flash and Mike looks over to see Mini-Moo hopping onto the table – she’s more adventurous than her brother, who Mike can feel against his legs under the table, and when there’s people around, she wants to be the center of attention. “Dammit, cat,” Mike grumbles, scooping Mini-Moo off the table and into his lap before he shoves the ring back it into his pocket. “Since November,” Mike says, looking at Will.

“Wait, hold on,” Dustin says, hand raised to point at Mike. “Are you seriously telling me you’ve had this ring for *five months* and you’ve

haven't popped the question yet? You, Michael 'Heart Eyes' Wheeler, the future Mr. El Hopper, the most over-the-top romantic *I know*, have been able to keep a lid on it for this fucking long?"

"Yeah, man," Lucas says. "You've been wanting to marry El *forever*. We all figured the second you got a ring, you'd be slipping it on her finger. Were you replaced with a pod person, or something?"

Mike rolls his eyes. "Oh, ha ha, you guys. I haven't had an idea until now. I just want it to be perfect. She deserves nothing less than that."

Dustin chuckles. "Wait, never mind, there he is. *That* makes sense. Gotta be perfect for your lady love, eh?"

Mike knows Dustin's just trying to get a rise out of him, so he takes the high road and leans into it. "Of course. I love her." Admitting that is literally the easiest thing for Mike to do. There's not a day that goes by that he doesn't think he was put on this Earth for one thing and one thing only: to love El Hopper. "It's why I asked you over early when I knew she wasn't going to be home. So I could talk to you." Mike stops, taking a deep breath. This isn't scary but, *god*, is it overwhelming.

Max smiles. "A Party member requires assistance."

Mike grins. "He does. He *really* does."

But we're getting ahead of ourselves.

Let's take a step back and appreciate just how we came to be at this point...

Hard to believe Mike's journey to get to this point started with 30 dollars and 41 cents in a small metal tin a little over 6 years ago.

He's standing in front of a jewelry store, checkbook for his savings account tucked safely into his pocket. He'd open the savings account the summer before sophomore year of college, when the amount of money he was saving got to a point where he didn't feel secure storing it where someone could potentially stumble on it. *Bank's a lot safer than a metal tin tucked in the back of the closet, that's for sure.*

It's the end of November, everyone freshly back from Thanksgiving break, and there's a bit of a chill in the air as the year barrels towards winter. Mike's trembling a bit as he stands in front of the jewelry store and, if he were a different kind of man, he would definitely blame the way his limbs are shaking on the cold.

But that would be a lie.

Truth be told (and friends *always* tell the truth), Mike's trembling because he's excited. Because this is *finally* it. He's been saving for over 6 years for this one purpose: to buy El an engagement ring so he can formally, *finally*, ask her to marry him. It's one more step towards the dream that's been nestled in his heart and brain since she came back to him in 1984: to be with her, by her side for the rest of his life. And he wants it *all* with her: house, marriage, a family. He's got the house...kind of. Yeah, they rent instead of own, but *still*, they're living together and that's what counts.

Now it's time for the next step: marriage.

Which means he needs a ring.

Mike figures he probably shouldn't look quite so excited as he walks into the jewelry store – bright smile, jaunty step – but he really, *really* can't help himself.

The store is quiet, intimate. Lush carpeting underfoot, shining glass cases lit from within, dim lighting above, wood paneling along the walls. It's the middle of the day on a Wednesday, so there's no one else in there but the store owner, who looks up as the door opens. He's an older man, maybe early 50s, dressed impeccably in a suit – slacks, vest, tie – and when he sees Mike, he smiles. “Ah, good afternoon! Is there something I can help you find, young man? A gift for your young lady, perhaps?”

Mike lets out a laugh as he crosses the small store to where the owner is standing behind the counter. “Not quite,” he says, pressing his hands against the counter as he leans on it just a bit. “I’m here to buy an engagement ring.”

The man smiles. “My congratulations to you and your future bride!” A thrill runs through Mike. *Bride.*

Soon. *Very soon.*

“As you can see,” the owner says, gesturing at the cases. “I have a variety of options to choose from. Did you have a style in mind? Or, maybe it would be easier to give me a price range?”

Mike doesn’t even need to think. “\$3000 is my upper limit.”

Mike doesn’t miss the way surprise flashes across the older man’s face. *Clearly didn’t expect someone my age to have that much money.* “Quite an impressive sum,” the owner says, brows arching.

Mike grins. “Been saving for 6 years. Nothing but the best for her.” Mike’s aware of the way his voice softens. He’s completely unable to stop it from happening and completely unable to care.

The owner must hear the tone in Mike’s voice, because he smiles kindly, softly. “She must be a lovely woman.”

Images of El flash through Mike’s head – the smile when she sees him, the soft look on her face while she sleeps, the way her face lights up when she laughs, the gentle sway of her hips as she moves through the home they share together, the feel of her in his arms – and his heart feels like it’s going to burst, he’s so in love with her. “She’s beautiful, the best.”

“Sounds like you better marry that girl, then,” the owner says. “Come, let’s start over here, just to narrow down what you might be looking for....”

Mike spends what feels like *hours* in that store, looking at rings, learning about the 4 Cs, weighing between gold and white gold and platinum, just one stone versus adding satellite stones. Mike had done some research, but this is just almost *too much*. But he’s willing to

power through it, because he's not leaving without a ring, not without the *perfect* ring.

And then he sees it – shining, glittering, elegant. Perfect.

Mike smiles. He feels weightless, breathless, *overjoyed*.

Oh, there you are.

It's December and the Party's home for Christmas break, the last of their undergraduate days.

Mike wakes up in the Hopper-Byers household on a cold, Tuesday morning, three days before Christmas. El's snuggled up against him, her arms wrapped around him as she spoons him, and he can feel the rise and fall of her bare breasts against the skin of his back as she breathes deeply in sleep, her body warm against his beneath the blankets.

It's oddly quiet and Mike realizes it's the absence of the cats that woke him. They've had the cats for only 7 months, but Mike's already used to their presence at the foot of the bed (he's so grateful that Jenny agreed to look after them while he and El are home in Hawkins, grateful that she was already staying in Chicago, and how he already loves those cats as much as he does is a goddamn miracle).

Now that he's awake, there's no way he's going to be able to go back to sleep. Which is unfortunate, since his very naked girlfriend is still curled up against him. But Hop's probably up by now and, well, Mike wanted to talk to him anyway.

First, though....

Mike slowly turns in El's embrace, careful not to wake her. Though, there's not much reason to be. El barely stirs – she's become something of a heavy sleeper over the years, especially in the early dawn hours – and Mike's able to turn so he's facing her completely

with only a minimal reaction from her, a soft whimper that Mike can barely hear but that tugs at his heart nonetheless.

For a moment, Mike just stares at her. Her face is relaxed in sleep, peaceful and ethereal, framed by a cloud of dark curls, mussed partly from sleep and partly from him running his fingers through it just hours ago. Mike traces the curve of her with his eyes – the slope of her cheek, the sweep of her neck, the roundness of her shoulder. He grins as he spots the dark hickey just beneath her collarbone, out towards her shoulder. He knows there's a matching one on him – product of a way to occupy their mouths so they aren't too loud as they have sex in her childhood bed, *again* – and a shiver runs through him from the memory.

*(her on top of him, mouth pressed against his collarbone as she arches against him, his body moving beneath hers in just the right way to make her gasp, her breath fanning against his skin as she breathes out through her nose, the lines of her body going taut beneath his touch, sucking **hard** on the skin beneath her mouth as she falls apart.)*

Mike shakes his head. God, he hopes it never stops being so overwhelming, making love to El. He keeps waiting for it to happen, for the passion to fade, for the urgency to smooth away. But it doesn't. If anything, it grows the longer they're together. It's not the same, not like when they were teenagers or anything – when everything was new, when they were both so *needy* – it's different, familiar and breathtaking all at the same time (though it's *always* been breathtaking).

Being with El is breathtaking and it's not just the sex, which is *oh my god* levels of fantastic – it's *everything*. Every moment he's with her is full of awe and love and he's never going to get over it.

Mike's keenly aware of the ring that's only feet away, wrapped in a thin, small scrap of cloth and tucked into the Death Star shaped keychain container that El got him because she thought it was cute. *Certainly coming in handy **now***. It would be so easy to reach for his keys on the nightstand behind him and pull the ring out, slip it onto her finger, even if only to see what it looks like. Or maybe to keep it there, to let her wake up to it, to wait until she sees it in the soft morning light. He could ask her right now, *right here*, where it's just

the two of them, alone and together.

But the moment's not right. Mike can feel it. And it needs to be right, *perfect*. El deserves nothing less.

So, Mike just leans over and presses a gentle kiss against El's forehead before he slides out of bed, the open air of the room practically frigid compared to the warmth of their combined body heat beneath the blanket. Mike gets dressed as quickly and quietly as possible, throwing on yesterday's jeans over a clean pair of boxers, grabbing a sweater from the pile of his that have ended up here over the years (either because Mike left them or El stole them). He heads downstairs with his feet bare, padding softly across the carpet, only to be greeted by the sight of Hop sitting at the kitchen table, paper spread out in front of him as he drinks from a steaming mug.

"Morning," Mike says. "Is that coffee?"

Hop looks up, grinning. "You betcha. There's a pot on the counter. Help yourself."

"Thanks," Mike says. It's a quick process – pour coffee, add cream, stir – and then Mike's sitting down at the table, mug cradled between his palms.

"Sleep well?" Hop asks.

The hickey on Mike's collarbone pulses a bit – *a little awkward* – but Hop's just being polite, Mike knows. Besides, he and El are 21, and it's not like Hop is naïve. Mike knows the older man is well aware that his daughter has sex regularly – *very regularly, at least once-a-day regularly*, a corner of Mike's mind reminds him with smug satisfaction – but it's still not something either man has come out and addressed. And they *never will*. But, given what Mike and El got up to less than 12 hours ago just upstairs, well...*yeah, this is awkward*.

Mike takes a sip of his coffee to clear his throat as he nods. "Yeah, slept alright." Mike looks around. "Where's Joyce?"

"The store, filling in for someone who called in sick," Hop says. "I keep telling her she doesn't have to work at that store anymore,

but..." Hop trails off, shrugging. "She'd probably go stir crazy without something to do every day."

Mike grins. "I don't think Joyce is much one for being a housewife, anyway."

Hop grins. "Damn straight." Hop leans back, mug in one hand. "When do you hear back about grad school?"

Mike frowns a bit. He, Lucas, and Dustin have all applied to the Masters Engineering program at Northwestern and none of them have heard back yet. He knows it's the same with El and the Master's of Library Science program she's applied to (of the entire Party, only Max and Will are not going on to pursue a master's degree – Will going off to work with Greg at the gallery he works for while producing art full time, while Max already has a job lined up at a marketing agency she interned at last summer).

"We should be hearing back in February," Mike says. "Though, I don't think there's any reason for any of us to worry. I just...don't like waiting."

"Yeah, patience has never been one of your strong suits, Mike," Hop says with a laugh.

Mike winces, feeling called out. "Yeah, I know. I'm working on it, I promise." Mike looks around, ears straining for any sound of movement in the rest of the house, but both Will and El are still asleep upstairs and the house is quiet. Mike knows that he's not going to get a better opportunity than this. "So, um, Hop. There's something I wanted to talk to you about." Is his voice shaking? God, it is, isn't it?

Hop looks at Mike, gaze intense and, for a second, Mike thinks that the older man can read his mind. And then he smiles. "You're finally going to ask her to marry you, aren't you?"

Scratch that. Hop can *definitely* read minds.

Mike's heart leaps into his throat and he almost falls out of his chair. "Jesus, how did you know?" he says, glancing back towards the

stairs. *Just in case.*

Hop lets out a huffed breath that might be a laugh, but it's a kind sound regardless. "Please, kid. I've been waiting for you to tell me for years. Was starting to wonder when it was gonna happen." He levels a look at Mike. "You're not asking me for permission, are you? Because I can't give you that."

Mike smiles despite the way he's trembling a bit. "Ha, right. Like El needs your permission to do *anything*. She'd be *pissed* at me if I asked for your permission or your blessing or whatever." And El would, too. She spent the first 12 years of her life as nothing more than someone's property and Mike never wants her to feel that way ever again. "But, you asked me to give you a heads up. Remember?" It's a moment that's burned in Mike's memory – the day of Hop and Joyce's wedding, El catching the bouquet, Hop telling him just to give a heads up before he proposed – which was very overwhelming to a 15 year old boy, Mike has to admit.

"Yeah, I remember," Hop says. "Consider that a promise fulfilled." He pauses, arms crossing over his chest. "So, you have a ring?"

Mike grins. "Yeah, wanna see it?" Hop is the first person Mike's told that he actually has the ring and he's desperate to show it to someone.

"Give it here," Hop says, gesturing with one hand, palm up, fingers beckoning.

Mike gives Hop a pointed look as he digs his keys out of his pocket. "Don't laugh," he says, keys jangling a bit.

The plea doesn't work as Hop laughs while Mike opens the Death Star shaped container. "Jesus Christ, kid."

Mike glares. "Hey, it's the best place I could think of to keep it. Your daughter's nosy and I know I wouldn't be able to hide a jewelry box forever." Mike manages to open the small container and he pulls out the bundled ring, unfolding the cloth before handing \$2500 worth of gold and diamond over to Hop.

Hop looks at it, the ring pinched delicately between thumb and forefinger. After a beat, he lets out a low whistle. "Nicely done, Mike." He hands it back. "Seriously, good job."

"Yeah?" Mike asks as he tucks the ring back into the Death Star keychain and slips his keys back into his pocket.

The smile Hop's giving him is soft and proud and it makes Mike's heart hurt. "Yeah." Then Hop's smile turns into a grin and he chuckles. "So, when are you gonna ask her?"

Mike groans. God, he should have known that was coming. "Uh... dunno yet," Mike says, mumbling a bit. "Need to figure out how, first."

"It's simple," Hop says with a snort. "You get down on one knee and say 'El, will you marry me?'."

"Hop, I love you, so I mean this with all sincerity," Mike says, giving Hop a look. "Do you really not know me well enough to think that I'm the type to do simple?"

At this, Hop laughs, almost a little too loudly. "Point taken, kid. Point taken."

Yeah, so Mike doesn't know how he's gonna propose to El. But he's a smart guy. He'll think of something soon.

It takes Mike almost 4 months to figure it out.

Granted, there's quite of bit that goes on in those 4 months, mostly a lot of anxiety about getting into grad school that paired with the equally crippling anxiety about making his proposal to El perfect.

El's birthday comes and goes and *still* Mike doesn't know and he's starting to both worry and get angry at himself – *god, you need to figure this out or just fucking propose already*, his brain screams at him. The ring is increasingly feeling like it's burning a hole in his pocket

(he's also getting worried about losing the damn thing and knows it'll be a lot more secure once El's wearing it and *oh god he can't wait for her to wear it*).

But then, he figures it out. And he can barely contain himself, he's so happy.

It's a few days after El's birthday and her stress levels are increasingly rising. Her senior thesis is due in less than two months and, while Mike can't entirely commiserate (as an engineering major, he doesn't have a thesis, just a bunch of finals to pass and he already did his senior project the previous semester), he can sympathize and he *worries*.

He wants to do something for her, something nice after her senior thesis is due in the end of April.

And that's when it hits him. And he immediately starts planning.

First, he needs to call the families.

He calls Hop first, giving him a day (May 1st), with the message that instructions are forthcoming, but to make sure to be in Chicago with Joyce and Kali on that day.

His second call isn't to his mom, though. It's to Nancy.

It's the last week of March and Nancy's tired.

She's had a long day at work (the jump from beat reporting to more long-form has been more exhausting than expected) and all she wants to do is be at home, snuggled up between her boys, maybe with a nice bottle of wine and a movie or something.

She's the first one home – Jonathan's working late and it takes Steve a bit of time to get home from Hawkins, especially if he gets held up at all at the station – and the first thing Nancy does is kick off her heels and plop face first down onto the couch.

She stays like this for she doesn't know how long, even when the front door open and a voice calls out. "Honey, I'm home!"

Nancy can hear Steve's shit-eating grin from the couch and she just lets out a groan before she turns her head enough so her reply's not muffled. "In the family room!" she calls back, letting her face stay smooshed against the cushion.

She hears Steve's footsteps, but doesn't have it in her to lift her head. She feels Steve sit down on the edge of the middle cushion, his weight dipping the couch, his hip pressed against hers, all warm and solid. "Hey, Nance," he says, reaching out to push her hair out of her eyes. "Long day?"

"The longest," Nancy sighs, shifting so she's laying on her side, grabbing his hand with both of hers. She smiles, liking the warmth of his hand in hers. "How was yours?"

Steve smiles, shrugging. "Not bad, not bad. Pretty quiet day in Middle America." He leans over and presses a soft kiss against her lips. "You want me to open a bottle of wine? Maybe rub your feet?"

Nancy giggles. "Steve Harrington, you're such a beautiful idiot."

The smile on Steve's face widens to be enough to outshine the sun. "That's me, a beautiful idiot, at your service."

He gets up, Nancy following as far as sitting up on the couch, and returns a few minutes later with a glass of red wine for her and a beer for him. Steve turns on the TV – some sitcom suddenly blaring in the background – and Nancy snuggles up to him as he sits down on the couch.

This is how Jonathan finds them a couple of hours later and he smiles, breathing out a small laugh. "Couldn't wait for me to crack open the bottle of wine, could you?"

"Hey," Steve says, pointing. "You didn't see her when I got home. It was either wine or face her cranky wrath. It was self-preservation, man."

"Heh, likely story," Jonathan says as he comes over, leaning down

first to kiss Steve, and then Nancy before plopping down on the other side of Steve. “What did we want to do for dinner?” Jonathan asks in lieu of asking about their days – Nancy knows it’ll be part of the ritual of making and eating dinner, soon enough, three of them talking about their days.

And that’s exactly what’s happening, Nancy perched on the counter while she watches Steve and Jonathan cook dinner – steak and potatoes, since it’s that kind of night – the three of them drinking wine or beer, talking and laughing and bitching (because, really, half the fun of being an adult is complaining about your day).

This routine is interrupted by the ringing of the phone. And, with Jonathan’s hands full with stirring ingredients into the mashed potatoes, Steve is the next closest and, so, goes for the phone. “Scuse me,” he says, squeezing past Jonathan with a quick kiss on the cheek, scooping up the cordless phone a second later. “Yello?” he drawls into the phone as he answers. “Oh, hey Mike. Yeah, she’s right here, hold on.” Steve pulls away the phone and heads over to Nancy. “It’s the most annoying Wheeler on the phone.”

Nancy snorts. “That’s my dad.”

Steve grins. “Well, then, it’s the nerdiest Wheeler,” he says as he hands the phone over.

Nancy can barely hear Mike’s voice from the receiver, but she can still make out the words anyway. “I can hear you!” Mike yells, voice tiny and faraway sounding.

Nancy’s laughing as she presses the phone to her hear. “Steve just teasing, Mike. He really loves you.” Nancy tilts the mouthpiece away from her face. “Don’t you, Steve?”

“I’m taking the answer to that question to my grave,” Steve says with a wink.

Nancy rolls her eyes. “Anyway, what’s up, little brother?”

Mike sighs. “Nancy, I’m almost a foot taller than you. I’m not little anymore.”

“Hey, you’ll always be that little twerp who stole from my piggy bank,” Nancy says, swinging her feet back and forth. “Don’t care how tall you are.”

“Great, thanks,” Mike says and Nancy can *hear* him rolling his eyes.

“Anyway, why are you calling? It’s not our usual time.” Mike and Nancy talk once a week, usually on Sundays when they’re both guaranteed to have the night off. And it’s a Tuesday. But Mike doesn’t sound panicked, so it can’t be bad news.

“Uh, yeah. I was wondering what the three of you were doing on May 1st?”

Nancy looks up, thinking. “Uh, nothing that I know of,” she says slowly, thinking through her calendar. “Why?”

“Because I’m going to propose to El and I want to throw her a surprise engagement party.”

The words are said with such aplomb, such *ease*, that Nancy chokes on the gasp that comes out of her throat. “What?”

Mike laughs. “What part do you want me to repeat? The proposal or the engagement party?”

Nancy’s jaw drops, giddy excitement bubbling up inside of her. “Oh my god, Mike! Are you serious?” She can see Jonathan and Steve both looking at her, curious confusion on their faces.

“100% serious,” Mike says. “Hop, Joyce, and Kali are gonna be there. Haven’t called Mom yet, but that’s next after I get off the phone with you. And I already have the ring.” Mike pauses, breathing out a laugh. “I’ve had the ring for 4 months, actually. Just couldn’t think of how I wanted to propose until a few days ago.”

“4 months? Jesus. *Mike*.”

“What? I couldn’t figure out how to propose until recently. It needs to be perfect, Nance. You *know* this.”

The giddiness in Nancy’s chest settles into warm happiness, so warm

she feels like she's glowing. For all how she and Mike used to fight as children, for all that they've been through together, both good and bad, she's so happy for him now, so happy to be close to him as adults, and so unbelievably over the moon that he has someone like El in his life, who loves him as much as he loves her. And make no mistake. Mike Wheeler loves El Hopper with more intensity than Nancy has ever seen a person love someone. And it's fucking adorable. "Aww, that's so sweet!" Nancy coos, practically melting.

"Thanks," Mike says, a little embarrassed, but mostly proud, happy. "So, you'll be there? On May 1st?"

"Just tell us where," Nancy says. "And Mike?"

"Yeah, Nance?"

Nancy takes in a deep breath, feeling the tears beginning to gather in the corner of her eyes, and smiles. "I'm happy for you. Really, *incredibly* happy. It's all I've ever wanted for you."

Mike lets out a low laugh, full of emotion. "Thanks," he says, voice suspiciously thick. "But I think the way you shut me in the refrigerator when I was 4 says otherwise."

Nancy laughs, too, sounding a little too close to a sob. "Well, in my defense, you were pulling on my pigtails."

"Nancy, I almost froze to death!"

"Psh, you were in there for a minute, tops."

Mike sighs, still laughing, but with incredulity. "Right. Well, I better go. I still need to call Mom, let her know about the 1st."

"Yeah, she's gonna flip, Mike. Just be prepared for that."

"Thanks," Mike says. "Just want I needed." Another sigh. "Well, I'll talk to you later, Nancy. Love you."

"Love you, too, Mike. And congratulations."

"She hasn't said yes, *yet*."

Nancy smiles, feeling like her face is going to break. “She will, though. She will.” Mike and Nancy get off the line and Nancy presses the button to cut the call, smiling as she looks down at the cordless.

“What’s going on?” Steve asks.

“Yeah, you look like you’re going to explode with happiness,” Jonathan says.

Nancy looks at both of her boys and can’t hold back her giggles, clutching the phone to her chest. “Mike and El are going to get married!”

Karen has just finished drying the last of the dishes when the phone rings. She can hear the telltale signs of the TV turning on at the same time and she sighs – this has been a problem with Holly, recently, watching too much TV after dinner. *We’ve talked about this*, she thinks, knowing she has to have *another* conversation with her daughter, as she picks up the phone. “Hello?”

“Hi, Mom.”

Karen frowns. “Mike?” She looks at the clock, noting the time – 7:30 – and tries to tamp down the beginning of panic swimming in her veins. “Is everything ok? Is El ok?”

Mike lets out a laugh. “Oh, yeah. She’s fine. She has class tonight until 9.”

Karen places a hand over her heart in an attempt to calm it down. “Don’t scare me like that, Michael.”

“Uh, yeah, sorry,” Mike says. “I know this isn’t our usual time. But there was something I wanted to talk to you about.”

Karen turns so that she’s leaning against the kitchen island. “What is it?”

Mike breathes. "So, um, I'm planning on proposing. To El. On May 1st. And I'm throwing her a surprise engagement party?"

Karen gasps, the earlier panic switching over to happiness like a switch flipping. "You are? Oh, Mike, that's *fantastic*." Really, she's been waiting for this news for she doesn't know how long. *It's about time.*

Mike lets out a relieved laugh. "Thanks," he says. "I, um, I wanted everyone to be there. To celebrate. Like the whole family."

A twist of sadness takes over Karen's gut, souring her happiness a bit. "Including your father?"

"If he wants to go," Mike says, sighing. "I know he doesn't know El that well, but, you know...he's my *dad*."

Karen would argue that Jim is more Mike's dad than Ted is, but that's beside the point she knows Mike is trying to make. "Well, you know he's mostly out in Indianapolis these days." It's been a long time, since right before Mike went off to college, that she and Ted admitted it wasn't working, that it's never going to work. They're still not divorced, he still helps pay the mortgage on the house, but Ted spends most of his time in Indianapolis at his company's headquarters, so he lives out there most of the week in an apartment he's renting. Sometimes he comes home on the weekends. But most of them time, he doesn't and Karen practically has no more marriage anymore.

"I know," Mike says, sounding a little sad and angry. "But, he should know, right? Even if he doesn't want to go?"

Karen knows that if Ted doesn't show up (and she doubts he actually will), that'll be it for any hope of a relationship between father and son. "I'll ask him, Mike," Karen says. "Did you want Holly to come?"

Mike laughs. "Yeah, if you want to bring her out. She might be bored, but I know she loves El."

"Hmm," Karen says, laughing a bit in return. "I'll think about that. Not sure I want to drag a 12-year old to Chicago."

“Why, afraid she’s going to run off, join a gang?”

Karen lets out a snort that is not very ladylike. “More like *start* one,” she says. Of all her children, headstrong and stubborn to a fault, Holly is the most trailblazing, most assertive.

Mike laughs again. “Oh, god, Chicago, watch out.”

“Maybe I’ll have her stay with a friend,” Karen says.

Karen can hear a bit of shuffling as Mike shrugs. “Whatever. I’d love to have her, but it’s your choice.”

“Hmm,” Karen sighs. “Well, regardless, I’m so happy for you, Mike. El’s a beautiful, lovely woman who loves you very much. You’re going to be very happy together.” *Not that they aren’t, already*, Karen thinks.

“Yeah, I know,” Mike says, soft and loving, so secure in his feelings for El.

“And then you can start on giving me grandchildren,” Karen says, smiling. “I’m not getting any younger, Mike.”

Mike makes a sound that is part groan, part laugh. “Mom! We aren’t even married, yet!”

“Well, it’s never too early to start thinking about it. I don’t want to be an old grandmother. I’m almost 47, Michael. Don’t make me wait until I’m 60.”

“Mom,” Mike groans. “*Please.*”

Karen smiles, shaking her head. “Ok, ok, *fine*. I’ll give it a rest for the moment.”

“*Thank you.*”

“Just as long as you have a baby by the time I’m 55, that’s all I want.”

“Mom!”

Now, back to where we were earlier....

Mike looks around at the dining room table, the rest of the Party minus El sitting assembled. "So, you in?" he asks, having just explained his plan.

Dustin reaches out and places a hand on Mike's shoulder. "Mike, I think I speak for everyone here when I say: no shit, we're in."

"Yeah, this sounds amazing," Max says, all complete sincerity. "And it's going to make El so happy."

"Yeah?" Mike says.

Max nods. "Yeah. Besides, it's not like you're asking us to plan anything," she says. "You're just asking us to help make it happen."

This is true. Mike's already made all the arrangements. The Party is just going to help him with the execution. "Fair point."

"Also, you need us to make sure this goes right," Lucas says. "Your surprise plans have a tendency to end in failure."

"Lucas, really?" Mike asks with a groan. "C'mon, man, it's my birthday."

"Dude, birthdays are no days for lies," Lucas says.

"No, birthdays are the *best* time for lies," Mike says.

"Yeah, I'm going to stop you guys right there," Will says as the front door begins to open – *El*. "No fighting, please. I've seen this movie one too many times."

“What movie?” El asks as she walks in through the front door.

Mike turns to see her, heart leaping into his throat. She’s dressed for work – jeans, a soft heather gray thermal, hair pulled back in a loose bun. *God, she’s beautiful.*

“Nothing,” Will says. “Mike and Lucas were just starting to bicker again.”

“Were not,” Mike pouts as he feels El come up behind him.

“You probably were,” El says, sliding her arms around him from behind, pressing a kiss to the corner of his jaw. “Happy birthday.”

Mike turns, head angling up so he can kiss her properly. “You already wished me a happy birthday.”

“Still, wanted to say it again,” El says, kissing him, her lips slanting over his.

“Oh, god, you two,” Dustin says, gagging. “Please, I really, *really* don’t need to know about your sex life. I really don’t.”

Mike just flips him off as he kisses El back, his other hand threading through the hair behind her ear, fingers brushing up against the base of her bun. His whole being *sings* with her closeness, the feel of her lips pressed against his, the faint smell of her shampoo, soft touch of her hands on the sides of his neck.

El pulls back a couple of moments later and smiles down at him. “Let me go change and we can head out. Be right back.”

Mike watches her go, transfixed, awestruck, *so in love*.

“Dude, I don’t know how this is possible, but you have it *bad* in the way that gets worse every damn day,” Lucas says.

“Yeah,” Mike sighs, nowhere even close to being concerned or sorry or regretful. How could he when she makes him so happy?

The rest of the Party is still fondly teasing him when El comes back downstairs, dressed in a sweater and a black skirt that hits her thighs

just so, all soft and gorgeous and *does he really have to go out tonight?*

But, of course, they do. There's food and drinks and laughter, so much laughter, and presents and Mike's never been happier.

He comes home, tipsy but coherent, one arm around El's shoulders, holding her close. She's had a few tonight, also, and they're both relaxed and happy.

They walk through the front door, Peanut and Mini-Moo immediately weaving in between their feet, getting underfoot in the way that only cats can. El places the presents Mike opened at dinner on the ground next to the front door before both of them head upstairs.

"Did you have fun tonight?" El asks as Mike sits down and begins toeing off his shoes.

He looks as she heads into the bathroom, the door open as she gets ready for bed – taking off her makeup, brushing her hair and teeth, the whole routine – though he can only hear her moving around in there. "Yeah, s'was nice," Mike says. "Everyone bought me drinks, which is always good."

El giggles, the sound so very pleasing to his ears. "It's your birthday. *Of course* everyone bought you drinks."

"Hmm, true," Mike says as he unbuttons his shirt, just enough to pull it over his head, where he just tosses it to the ground. "I liked the presents, too. That was cool." The Party chipped in to get him a poster for "The Empire Strikes Back" signed by the cast, and El also got him a nice writing journal and pen set for him to outline. All in all, not a bad birthday.

"Where are you gonna hang the poster?" El asks.

"Not sure," Mike calls back as he tosses his socks in the direction of the hamper – one makes it in, the other doesn't, he notices with a wince. He turns to angle his voice in her direction, towards the door. "I was thinking – *oh*."

El's standing in the doorway, smiling coyly. Her hair spills down over shoulders covered in navy silk – a robe that barely goes past her hips,

tied so loosely it does almost nothing to hide what she is – *or isn't* – wearing beneath, giving him glimpses of sheer lace and bare skin. Her hands tease at the knot of the robe as she slowly saunters towards him, hips swaying seductively, her bare feet ghosting across the carpet.

Mike can't breathe. Jesus Christ, *he can't breathe*. His girlfriend, the love of his life, is walking towards him looking like the sweetest sin known to man. "*El*," he manages to breathe out.

El comes around the bed and slowly plants her knees on either side of his thighs. "I have one more birthday present for you," she says, taking his hands and placing them on her hips, just below the sash around her waist. "Did you want to open it?"

Mike has to close his eyes as he struggles to pull himself under some measure of control. Because on top of not being able to breathe properly, the words *marry me* are on the tip of his tongue, dying to get out. *Really not the time*, he tries to tell himself. *Do **not** propose to her while she's wearing lingerie. Remember, it's tacky to propose on your birthday, tacky.* But it's hard to get that thought through his brain and out to his mouth where those words are living so dangerously close to the edge.

And then Mike feels El's lips against the corner of his jaw and *talking* is suddenly the last thing on his mind. His hands tighten on her hips, the heat of her bleeding through the thin silk that covers her. He inches his fingers up towards the knot at her waist, lips pulling up in a smile. "El?"

El presses her lips high on his cheek, right in front of his ear. "Yeah?"

"I love you."

El pulls back enough so that Mike can look into her face, her eyes dark, lips parted just so, cheeks flushed with excitement. "Then show me."

And, so, he does.

The next few weeks pass quickly, Mike making his final preparations – arranging final orders for food, making sure that everything's set up for El to be out of the house and *away* for the day (and using a considerable chunk of the money he had left over from saving for her engagement ring to do so). He watches El all the while, sees how stressed she is, all sleepless nights and constantly buried in books. He does whatever she needs – gets her coffee, makes sure she eats, gives her backrubs (sometimes leading to them wearing very little to no clothing, which is fine since that *really* helps her relax).

Friday, April 30th is when El turns in her thesis and when she comes home a little after 6PM, she just *collapses* in bed, falling asleep still completely dressed. She wakes up long enough for dinner and to get ready for sleep, but is immediately back in bed after that, wrapped up in the warm, soft cocoon of the bed she and Mike share.

And that night, as Mike falls asleep, holding his beautiful soon-to-be fiancée in his arms, watching as the stress slowly bleeds from her body, he smiles.

Tomorrow. Everything changes tomorrow.

El wakes to the delicious sensation of a pair of warm lips smoothing down the length of her neck, each touch leaving tingles that ripple through her and cause her heart to skip a beat.

Mike.

El's lips begin to curl up in a lazy smile. She can feel Mike hovering above her, his body barely touching hers as he kisses her, mouth moving further and further down her body – the teasing of his mouth on her collarbone, the light scrape of his teeth on the outer curve of her breast, the soft, tickling pecks along her ribcage.

When Mike presses a suckling, open mouthed kiss just to the right of her belly button, El lets out a giggle, but refuses to open her eyes.

The sleepy, relaxed desire that's building in her veins is too good to ruin by opening her eyes. "Mike, what are you doing?"

"If I have to explain it, I'm clearly not doing it right," Mike says and El can hear the way he's smiling and she realizes that, never mind, she needs to open her eyes so she can see his face.

El opens her eyes and looks down, smiling broadly when she sees him, eyes sparkling, lips pulled up in a grin. "Not what I meant, genius," she teases, reaching with a hand to run her fingers through his messy hair.

Mike chuckles. "Well," he says, drawling it out as he shifts a bit, his head angling so he can press his lips just below her belly button. "You turned in your thesis yesterday." Another kiss, this one just above her hip bone. "And you've been working so hard." His lips now against the hollow of her hip, the pressure just enough to make El moan, her back arching as she squirms a bit. "So, I was thinking...." Mouth hot on the inner curve of her thigh. "We could celebrate."

And then he moves once more – *up, god yes* – and El's capacity for thought completely disappears.

Later, *way* later, El's trying to slow her racing heart and she smiles over at a similarly affected Mike. God, how is it always so good with them, every time they make love? El hopes that, no matter what, this never changes. "Well, good morning," she says, satisfaction filling every inch of her, all loose and relaxed.

"It is a good morning," Mike says, smiling softly, looking so dreamy and happy that El's heart almost hurts with how much she loves him, how much she loves seeing him like this. His fingers dance across the skin of her stomach, traveling across to land at her hip, palm wrapping around the curve between her waist and hip, and his touch is warm and solid and still, as always, *thrilling*.

El sighs. "Can we just stay in bed all day?" she asks, bringing her hand up so that she's cupping Mike's cheek, her thumb running across his skin, his lower lip – *that talented, talented mouth*.

She expects Mike to enthusiastically agree. But he just smiles and

shakes his head. “No can do,” he says, looking so excited that El can’t help but be swept up in it. “I have a surprise for you.”

El’s face feels like it’s going to freeze in a permanent smile, she’s grinning so widely. “For me? What is it?”

There’s a moment where Mike just stares at her, looking all breathless and awestruck, that El feels like her heart’s going to both implode and explode at the same time. It’s times like this where she wishes she could read minds, see what he’s *really* thinking. But then he smiles, looking mischievous and boyish and just *so pretty* that El starts to feel a bit breathless herself. “Well, like I said earlier, I know how hard you’ve been working, how stressed your thesis has made you. So I wanted to give you a special day.” Mike pauses, smiling. “I booked a day for you at a day spa. And then I made reservations for a nice dinner afterwards.”

Yeah, her heart’s going to explode. “A day spa?”

“Yeah, where you can get a massage or a manicure or a makeover or all of it. I got you this, like, all-inclusive package thing.”

A day full of relaxing and being pampered followed by a romantic dinner? God, what did El do to deserve him? She lets out a giggle, unable to contain her happiness. “Oh my god, I love you,” she says, leaning in to kiss him, smiling against his lips.

“Mm, love you, too,” Mike murmurs. “Now, as much as I would love to spend all day in bed with you, you have a spa appointment to attend.”

It’s with a strange combination of reluctance and excitement that El crawls out of bed. They shower, get dressed, and have a quick breakfast before Mike drives her across the city and pulls up in front of this gorgeous building - old red brick, ivy climbing up the sides, cool glass doors that hint at a luxurious lobby behind them. El can practically feel the tranquility from the car and her eyes glaze over with tears. Because Mike has been seeing how stressed she’s been, how hard she’s been working, and wanted to do something to make her feel better, to show her how proud he is of her. It’s almost too much and El feels so full of love.

She turns to him and she knows she's dangerously close to crying. "Oh my god, Mike," she says, reaching out for him, leaning over the center console. "This is the place? You did this for me?"

Mike leans in as well, but he shrugs, looking bashful and...nervous? "I just wanted you to have something special, something to make you feel good after all your hard work."

El takes his face in both of her hands and leans in to kiss him. The feel of his mouth on hers is just so perfect and she pours everything she's feeling into the kiss, all the happiness and love she feels for him, feelings he's given her so many times over the years. Slowly, the kiss ends and El pulls back, unable to stop smiling. "Ok, I'm going in. When are you picking me up?"

Mike grins. "5:30."

El's jaw drops. "That late?"

"Hey, when I said a day at the spa, I meant *a day*," Mike says. "And don't worry about getting ready for dinner. That's all taken care of."

El narrows her eyes at him. "What did you do?"

"You'll see," Mike says, eyes sparkling, smile twisting into a grin. "Now, go on. Go get all relaxed and I'll be back later."

El lets out an excited squeal, hands clapping together. "Ok, I'm going." She gives him one last kiss, a quick peck on the lips, before she slides out of the car, completely ready for a day of relaxation.

Mike watches El walk towards the entrance, feeling like his heart is going along with her. Excitement runs along every inch of his skin, all anticipation and a little bit of nervousness. El pauses at the door, turning around to give him a small wave, the smile on her face so bright, it's almost blinding. And then she slips inside, safely tucked away, leaving him to get the rest of the day ready.

Ready so he can propose to her. *Finally*.

Mike takes in a deep breath. "Alright. Here we go."

"Are you excited?"

Will looks over at Greg as they tear orange rose petals from their stems and drops them into a bowl. He and Greg are in charge of setting up tables, including the centerpieces. Across the room, Will spies Lucas and Max stringing white string lights across the awning and treillis. And, nearby, Dustin and Mike are setting up small candles. It's a beautiful venue, a small enclosed garden not far from where they all live, all iron wrought fences and rose bushes surrounding a gazebo with a small cottage house tucked in the back. Lord knows how Mike found this place, but it's perfect. *God, Mike really went all out, didn't he?* Will smiles at Greg. "Yeah, I am. I'm ecstatic, actually. They've been together for so long and well...they deserve this so much."

Greg lets out a small laugh. "Meant to be?"

Will sighs. "It really makes you wonder, if there is such a thing as soulmates. Because if anyone is, it's those two."

"They been together, what, 9 years now?" Greg asks.

"Yeah, if you count the start of their relationship as when she came back in '84," Will says. "Which they do. Or, at least, that's when they consider their anniversary to be."

"Well, they're adorable," Greg says. "And they deserve to be happy." There's a long pause. "And you get another brother."

Will laughs. "Well, that was going to happen, anyway," he says. "My brother and his sister are together, for just about as long as Mike and El have been, too."

Greg's brow furrows. "This is...Jonathan and Nancy, right? And

they're with Steve in a polyamorous relationship."

"Right," Will says. "I know this is confusing. My best friend is dating my step-sister, soon to be engaged. While our older siblings are dating/life partners with a third guy who used to be her boyfriend before my brother was." Will laughs, shaking his head. "It's a tangled mess, but I wouldn't have it any other way."

"I can't wait to meet them," Greg says.

Will smiles. "Yeah, they all want to meet you, too." Will's long since been out to the rest of his family and friends and they've known about Greg for *years*. It's just that Greg's never been able to make the trip out to Hawkins and the Hawkins contingent never really comes out to Chicago. "My mother is very excited about this, by the way. Just to warn you, she's...very much a mom."

Greg laughs. "All doting and mother henning?"

"Precisely," Will says with a huff. "She's gonna hug you, just so you know. And probably pinch your cheeks. And then she's gonna ask us when *we're* gonna get married."

Greg gives him a look. "She does realize that gay people can't get married, doesn't she?"

"Psh," Will says, waving a hand. "Like a little legality is going to stop my mother. She'll throw us a wedding ceremony herself and consider us married *just because she can*."

There's a bit of a pause before Greg sighs. "Did you want to?"

Will tilts his head, smiling. "What, get married? I'd love to get married to you," he says. "But, I don't really care too much as long as I have you in my life." Will reaches across and leans up to kiss Greg. It's a soft, quick kiss, but it's affirming in the way that most things aren't. "I love you. That's what matters. And, yeah, if you want to have a ceremony, you know we can do that, even if it won't matter legally." He gestures back towards his friends. "You see what we're doing here? You think my friends wouldn't jump at the chance to do something like this for us? They would. In a heartbeat." It's one of

the things Will knows at his core: that, no matter what, the Party is there for each other, now and forever.

Greg looks down at him, a little awed, wide-eyed and lips parted, before he's laughing, shaking his head. "You're something else, Will Byers."

Will grins. "Yeah, I know. That's why you love me."

"Dude, Mike's setting the bar really high," Lucas says as he watches Max push a large pin into the wood of the lattice awning, securing a section of the string lights.

"Please, Mike doesn't know any other way to be," Max says, carefully blowing a loose strand of hair that escaped from the French twist her hair's been pinned up into. Her hair's done, but she still needs to do her makeup and get dressed, which she'll do in the cottage after everything's finished getting set up.

Still, Max's hair is beautifully done, elegant, showing off the delicate curve of her neck in a way that Lucas just loves. "Your hair looks beautiful, by the way."

Max looks over at him from where she's standing on the ladder and she smiles, hopping down a second later. "Aww, Stalker, that's so sweet!" She bounces up onto her toes to press a quick kiss to his lips before she climbs back up onto the ladder. "And, by the way, you don't need to be as balls-to-the-wall like Mike in order to be romantic, you know that, right?"

Lucas looks around at everything and feels the skepticism slither into his stomach. "You're telling me you wouldn't want to be proposed to like this?" He and Max have talked about getting married, but it still feels like it's a bit of a way off for them. Not that Lucas is complaining. He loves her and she loves him, which is enough. But, someday, right? It'll happen someday?

Max breathes out a laugh, but it's kind, gentle. "No. Don't get me wrong, this is super romantic and El's super lucky. But she's the kind of woman who would want to be proposed to like this. I'm less flashy. I don't need the spectacle." She winks at him. "Besides, I trust you. You'll do it right."

Lucas smiles, feeling more at ease than he was a few minutes ago. "Oh, so you want me to propose?"

Max giggles, like fucking *giggles*, a bit high-pitched and breathless and she's smiling in a way that Lucas wants to see her smile like every day for the rest of his life. "I want you to *want* to propose. You do it right, I'll probably say yes."

Lucas levels a look at her as he passes her a large thumbtack. "Probably?"

Max smiles coyly at him. "Well, I can't make it *too* easy on you, can I?"

"Right, that's it," Lucas grumbles. He puts down the thumbtack container before he reaches up, wrapping his arms around her waist to the sound of her shrieking laughter.

"Lucas, put me down!"

He does and, immediately after, Lucas spins her around and kisses her, all breathless passion, his body hovering over her as he tilts her head back, his mouth slanting over hers in a way that sets his blood on fire. Max relaxes into the kiss, her lips parting beneath his. Her hand comes up to cup the back of his head, her nails scratching gently against his scalp, causing shivers to run down his spine and across his skin.

After a long moment, the kiss ends and Lucas pulls back, letting Max settle back fully onto her feet. But he doesn't let go of her, his hands still cupping her cheeks, her skin soft beneath his palms. "One day, I'm going to propose to you, Max Mayfield. And you're gonna say yes."

A pretty flush spreads over Max's cheeks before she grins. "But you

gotta ask me first. Until then, no guarantees.”

Lucas shakes his head. “What am I going to do with you, MadMax?”

The look on Max’s face takes a turn for the devious. “Oh, I can think of a few things,” she says, biting her lip. “Nothing for public consumption, though. I’m thinking you, me, not a whole lot of clothing...maybe *no* clothing....”

“Is that a promise?” Lucas asks, grinning. God, how he loves her.

Max reaches up and kisses him again, this time softer, but with no less heat. “Take it to the bank.”

Yeah, Lucas is going to marry this girl someday. He knows it as surely as he knows the sky is blue or the Earth revolves around the sun.

But first, they need to get Mike and El engaged.

It’s just after 5 and Mike is both so excited and nervous, he’s practically vibrating.

This is it. Everything’s ready. He’s wearing a suit. Their friends and family are here, all dressed up and ready to hide away in the cottage at the right time. There’s candles and lights and flowers and music and really, there’s no way this could be better than it is.

All that’s missing is El.

Mike reaches into his pocket and feels the smooth velvet of the jewelry box against his fingers. The ring’s back in there now – it’s really not romantic to propose with a Death Star keychain container as the ring box, no matter how much Dustin says it is.

And, speak the devil....

Dustin comes up and claps him on the shoulder. “Everything’s ready to go, man. You just gotta get El here. You know what you’re going

to say?”

Mike smiles. “No. Figured I’d just speak from the heart.”

Dustin chuckles. “You’ll be fine, then.”

“Thanks,” Mike says. “Right, so, I’ll have her here by 6, ok? But, just in case, get everyone inside by 5:50.”

“Will do, Mike.” Dustin breathes out a laugh, shaking his head. “I’d wish you luck, but I don’t think you need it.” He tilts his head. “Is it weird that this is both a long time coming and I can’t believe it’s actually happening?”

“Welcome to what’s going on in my head,” Mike says with a grin. “Right, I’m going to head out. Be back in a while.”

“Go get her, Mike,” Dustin says, giving Mike a quick hug before shoving him in the direction of the exit.

Mike makes it a couple of steps before he hears Dustin’s voice again. “Oh, and Mike?”

Mike turns. “Yeah?”

“Congratulations. You’re both very lucky.”

Mike smiles and, for a second, he sees a vision of the past, him and Dustin on their bikes, hunting for El. *You can’t have more than one best friend. – Says who? – Says logic. – Well I call bull on your logic. ‘Cause you’re my best friend too.*

Turns out Mike was right. You can have more than one best friend.

You can have five.

Especially if one of them is the love of your life.

It's the most magical day El's ever had. She spends the entire time draped in luxury. There's a massage and a soak in a hot tub, a facial, a body scrub, a mani-pedi where she picks out the cutest shade of pink. All the while, she chats with the ladies at the spa, gushing about Mike, each and every one of the women telling her how lucky she is, how what a catch Mike is. El agrees, so very much. She feels like a princess every day, and it's all because of him.

But, apparently, the day's not over.

While El's getting the finishing touches on her pedicure, one of the women, a stylist El has seen walking around, comes over, holding a large box. El looks up at her curiously as she approaches. "What's this?" she asks, tilting her head a bit.

"Your boyfriend left it for you. It's for tonight, your dinner. So we can do your hair and makeup to match."

El's mouth drops open in surprise. How does he do this? How does he keep surprising her? With hands that are trembling, El reaches and takes the lid off the box, gasping as she sees what's inside. It's a dress, a beautiful pink satin dress. "Oh my god," El says, feeling like she's going to cry.

The woman holding the box smiles, her eyes sparkling. "Would you like me to take it out so you can see it?" El nods, unable to speak for fear of bursting out into tears.

The woman sets the box down on the seat next to El and, with ginger hands, lifts the dress out, holding it up. El can see that there are shoes in the box, as well, but her gaze is mostly drawn to the dress. "Oh, Mike," she breathes, even though he's not here. And she doesn't dare reach for him through their connection. She'll dissolve into tears if she does.

It's a beautiful dress. Pale pink satin, off the shoulder neckline, fitted bodice that leads down to a full skirt which, if El had to guess, probably hits her just below the knee. And, from the looks of it, it fits her perfectly. *Of course he knows my size. Of course he does.* Why would she expect anything different?

The shoes that go with it – also in her size – are a pair of pale pink kitten heels, super cute and just perfectly matching with the dress. El immediately smells Nancy's influence on this entire outfit and makes a mental note to thank the older woman even as she's cooing over this dress.

True to form, it fits like it was made for her and if El didn't feel like a princess before, she *definitely* feels like one now. She gets her hair styled – nothing fancy, just a wash and a blow dry, her curls spread out in gentle waves, held way from her face with a couple of jeweled combs that she recognized as hers. And her makeup is just as simple, elegant and barely there.

All in all, she feels gorgeous and loved and cherished.

God, she's so lucky.

It's just before 5:30 and El's waiting in the lobby of the day spa, the masseuse who worked on her earlier hanging around and chatting with her, when El spies Mike's car pull up through the glass doors.

"Ooh, I think that's him," the masseuse says, grinning. "Go get your man, honey. Knock him dead."

El smiles at the other woman, shoulders shaking with silent laughter. "Thank you, for everything today."

"Oh, it was our pleasure. But, really, you should be thanking your boyfriend. He arranged this whole thing."

The warmth that blossoms in El's heart spreads throughout her entire body and she feels almost overwhelmed. "He's amazing, isn't he?"

The masseuse smiles. "From how you described him, he sounds perfect. Now, get out there. Don't keep him waiting."

El nods and, with a wave at the masseuse, turns to head outside. She can see Mike through the glass doors, where he's standing, leaning against the passenger side front door. He's wearing a suit, hair barely tamed, and looking so very handsome as he stands there, hands in his pockets, glancing up and down the street as he waits. El's heart leaps into her throat and she just takes a moment to look at him, where he

can't see her, all handsome and gorgeous and *hers*. She can feel the distance between them like it's a physical object and the yearning it stirs inside of her is too much to be ignored.

El exits the building and feels the outside air hit her for the first time in hours. Mike turns when he sees the door open and she knows the second he sees her because his jaw drops and he just *freezes*, his face filling with awe and almost disbelief.

El loves it when Mike sees her all dressed up. He looks at her like this and she feels beautiful, special, cherished.

Mike looks at her like this and she falls in love with him all over again, every time.

El stops just in front of him, maybe a foot away, and smiles. "Hi," she says, softly.

"Hi," Mike says, his voice just above a whisper. "You look...wow."

The awe in his voice, soft and loving and so encouraging, never fails to make her feel like the most beautiful woman in the world. "Yeah?" she asks, prompting, seeking. She knows she's fishing for compliments a little, but she can't help herself. She wants to know what he's thinking.

Mike shakes his head, like he can't believe what he's seeing, his eyes a little misty in a way that just makes El's heart feel like it's going to explode. "You look amazing, gorgeous. So, so beautiful." The words are spoken in a low, gentle voice that sends shivers down El's spine, making her feel like she could just float away. She wants to luxuriate in the tone of his voice for the rest of her life.

El lets out a soft giggle. "You don't look so bad yourself," she says as she reaches for him. She stands up on her toes, her hand coming to rest on his cheek, thumb against his cheekbone, and she pulls him down for a kiss. El feels Mike's hands go to her hips, his touch strong, sure, and warm, as he kisses her like there's nothing else he should be doing. His lips are soft against hers, but so, so warm, it makes her want to melt.

The kiss ends a few moments later – so overwhelming and not nearly enough all at the same time – and El looks up at Mike, seeing him look at her like she must be looking at him – so in love and just blown away.

But Mike smiles and reaches for her hand, ending the moment. “Shall we? We have somewhere to be.”

El giggles and lets Mike guide her back far enough so he can open the passenger door for her. “Yes, this mystery, romantic dinner. Any hints about where we’re going?”

Mike lets out a laugh as he opens the door and steps aside. “Yeah, right. What about the word ‘surprise’ do you never understand?”

El pouts, just a little, and entirely playfully. “Just that I don’t like it. You’re so mean to me, Mike.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he says, winking. “The meanest. I mean, how cruel of me to subject you to a day full of pampering followed up by a romantic evening? I’m just the worst.”

El rolls her eyes as she slides into the car. “You’re such a drama queen, Mike.”

Mike shuts the door and pops around to the other side. “Well, you love me,” he says as he ducks into the car. “So that sounds like a ‘you’ problem, not a ‘me’ one.”

Mike starts the car and grins at her. “So, how was the spa?” he asks as he buckles his seatbelt.

El spends the entire car ride just *gushing* about her day, so much that she doesn’t even notice the passage of time until Mike’s parking the car alongside a curb, not 5 minutes from their house. “It’s just down the street,” Mike says. “But parking’s always a bitch, so I thought we’d walk. Besides, it’s a nice night, yeah?”

It is a nice night. The last of the night’s chill is gone until after September at the earliest, winter but a memory. It’s a perfect night for walking hand and hand down the street with her very loving boyfriend. “Yeah, I’ve been cooped up inside all day, a walk sounds

perfect.”

El’s hand fits perfectly into Mike’s as they walk down the sidewalk, hands swinging back and forth a bit. “So, I told you about my day,” El says. “How about you? What’d you do today?”

Mike grins. “Oh, just hung out with the rest of the Party, nothing much. Dustin’s freaking out a bit about graduation in a couple of weeks, which is no big deal, because we’re going to grad school in the fall? But, you know Dustin and-” Mike stops, looking over at what looks like a garden house just off the side of the street. “Hey, this looks neat. Wanna go take a look?”

El peers in through the iron-wrought fence. There’s lights strung across the rails of a trellis that surrounds a gazebo, and she can see the faint glimmer of candles on the other side. It looks like it’s set up for an event and El frowns. “Should we go in there? It looks like there’s some sort of event going on.”

Mike shrugs, smiling. “Oh, just for a second, just to look. Worst can happen is we get kicked out.”

El looks up at him, shaking her head even as she’s smiling. He’s always like this, inquisitive and eager to explore. He’s always pulling her down off the beaten path, curious about what’s around the next corner, hungry to experience *everything*. “Ok, ok,” El says, giving in. “Just for a minute, though,” she says, pointing at him with arched eyebrows.

Mike smiles even wider. “Yes, ma’am.” Still holding onto her hand, Mike pushes open the gate, the iron swinging smoothly on well-oiled hinges, and they step inside. Mike steps aside, closing the gate behind her, while curiosity has now taken a hold of El, as well. She walks ahead of him, looking around, taking in the sights. There’s a small handful of tables just off to one side, each with 3-4 chairs around them, the centerpieces wide, wooden bowls with rocks and flower petals inside of them. There are candles scattered everywhere, on ledges, on tables, on the railings of the gazebo just ahead, the soft glow mixing seamlessly with the light from the string lights above.

And there are orange flower petals scattered across the brick beneath

her feet, on the stairs leading up to the gazebo, back to the cottage house behind it. El finds her feet following the path, drawn inexplicably to the small, covered structure, her fingers ghosting across the wooden post that frames the opening.

It's beautiful, intimate, and so very, *very* romantic.

"So, what do you think?" Mike asks. She can hear him behind her, almost right on her heels.

El's still looking around, still drinking it in, as she moves into the center of the gazebo, hearing Mike's footsteps close following hers. "It's beautiful."

"Good, I'm glad."

There's something in his voice that has the hairs on the back of her neck standing up and El turns to face him, her heart pounding in her chest. "You're glad?"

Mike shrugs, but he's smiling softly. "Yeah, I did this for you, after all."

El freezes, her jaw dropping. Goosebumps break out on her skin and she almost can't breathe. "Mike? What's going on?"

Mike looks down at her - *god, she's beautiful, glowing and just ethereal* - and, in an instant, every bit of nervousness, every scrap of anxiety, of worry, of fear, just fades away. She's looking up at him, the look on her face so open, so full of love, just a reflection of everything he feels for her. This is where he's supposed to be, in this moment, in this place, with her. Like he was never supposed to be anywhere else, with anyone else.

This is right. The most right anything has ever been.

Mike smiles and reaches for her, taking her hand, her right hand. "Have I ever told you how much I love you?" he asks. He runs his

thumb over her knuckles, feeling the soft glide of her skin beneath his touch. He looks down at her, sees her eyes shining with curiosity and unshed tears, her lips parted in soft surprise. Does she know what's happening? Maybe part of her does. "I think I always have. I can't remember a time when I didn't love you, even before you came into my life. I feel, sometimes, like I'm here just for this, like I exist just to love you."

Mike takes a deep breath, needing to breathe. His throat feels thick, there's the telltale sting of tears welling up in his eyes, but he can't stop. "You're everything I've ever wanted in my life. You're beautiful and kind and funny and smart and strong, so strong. You're my hero, El. You always have been and you always will be. And every day I get to have you in my life is the greatest gift I could ever receive. You make me a better person just by being with me."

"I know you like to say that I saved you on that night when I took you in from the rain, when I gave you a home and a name. But you saved me by giving me my world. And you continue to save me every day just by being by my side, by loving me and building a life with me. I know it's been a long road to get here, but there's a lot of road left to go and I'm hoping to do it by your side not as your boyfriend, but as your husband." He pauses, reaching into his pocket, neatly flipping open the jewelry box. "Marry me, El."

There are tears in El's eyes and Mike watches as she looks down, a soft sob hitching in her throat as she sees the ring. Her hand goes to her mouth and Mike's heart is pounding so hard, he thinks she has to be able to hear it. It's a beautiful ring, this he knows. White gold, large square cut diamond, flanked by two, smaller pear shaped diamonds. It's beautiful, but not over the top, elegant and refined. It's perfect.

El looks back up at him and she's smiling, looking so, so beautiful. Mike almost bursts into tears. "Yes," she says. "Yes, I'll marry you."

And, just like that, even though there's part of him that knew, just *knew* she'd say yes, Mike feels whole, *complete*. Because he's not looking down at his girlfriend anymore. He's looking at his fiancée, his future wife. And he's never, *ever* been happier.

With trembling fingers, Mike lifts the ring out of its resting place. He places the now empty jewelry box back in his pocket and slowly, sweetly, grabs El's hand and slips the ring on her ring finger. It feels like coming home and the start of something new all at the same time.

El looks down at the ring that's now secure on her finger, her face a marvel of awe and happiness, tears shining in her eyes. And then she reaches for him, fingers curling in the lapels of his jacket, tugging him down. He easily follows, bending so he can kiss her, her lips soft and sweet against his, rich with love, a little salty from her tears, and absolutely everything he's ever wanted.

His hands find their way, as ever, around her – one in her hair, the other pressed against the small of her back. The fabric beneath his palm is smooth and radiates with the warmth of her body. Her hands slide up his chest to link behind his neck, arms draped over his shoulders, so she can press up against him, all lithe curves and warm embrace.

Kissing El feels different, even though it's still just him and her and the love they share with each other, for each other. It's like being engaged to her has brought a sense of *permanence* and he wonders how it'll be to kiss her once they're actually married.

God, he can't wait.

The kiss slowly comes to an end and they're both smiling so hard, Mike will be surprised if their faces don't freeze this way. But he's just so happy, he doesn't care. Let his face freeze this way. "I still have one more surprise for you," he says, voice thick with emotion.

El just looks up at him, flabbergasted. "What?" she asks, still smiling despite the way her brow furrows with confusion.

Mike laughs. "I know how much you love the family you've built over the years. And I know how much it means to you to celebrate with everyone. So, I made sure that could happen." Grinning, Mike turns to look over his shoulders. "Guys, you can come out now!"

The door to the cottage house opens and everyone hiding inside files

out – his mom, Hop and Joyce, the Party and Greg, Steve, Jonathan, Nancy and even Kali, all of them there, all of them smiling, all of them there to celebrate Mike and El's engagement.

Mike turns to look back at El's shocked face, like it's all just too much in the best way possible. She looks up at him, the question on her face, and Mike can't hold back the answer. "I'm throwing you a surprise engagement party."

That's it. If El hadn't wanted to marry Mike, she sure as *hell* wants to now. "Oh, Mike," she says, unable to hold back her tears. "This is perfect, just...perfect." She reaches for him and he reaches back, folding her in his embrace, hugging her tight. She's being held by her *fiancé* and it's so perfect, she feels like she'll never want for anything else.

"Anything for you," Mike says, in a voice that sounds just as full of emotion as she feels right now. She loves him, she loves him *so much*.

El pulls back just enough to look up into Mike's beautiful, perfect face. She's smiling so hard, her face hurts. "I love you. I'm going to love you *forever*."

Mike laughs. "Good thing you're marrying me, then." The smile on Mike's face is so bright, so happy, it's all El's ever wanted for him.

El laughs, though it's a little teary, and she stretches up to kiss him. "Good thing, then."

Mike reaches for her left hand, his thumb automatically brushing over the gorgeous engagement ring on her finger – and *oh my god*, is it beautiful – before he jerks his head in the direction of where their family and friends all are. "Come on. Let's go celebrate with our family."

El smiles. *Our family*. "Yes, let's."

Notes for the Chapter:

I had a little more planned, but this was such a poetic note to end at, I couldn't pass it up. (this is what the missing scenes series i have planned is for...).

Also, regarding the engagement and the surprise engagement party, this is not something I made up. I was *at* a surprise engagement party for my cousin-in-law some years ago and it was very similar to what I wrote here. Just storybook romance come to life, I was so impressed (not like when I got engaged and ruined my own engagement...that's a story for a different day, though...)

Well, y'all can probably guess what's coming up at the end! *exaggerated winking*

33. May 1, 1993 - Nov 4, 1994

Notes for the Chapter:

I don't even know where to start, but I know that this text box does not give me enough characters to do justice for all the things I want to say.

First of all, thank you all for being with me on this amazing journey. I don't know if I could have made it 320k+ words without the support of all of you reading and commenting and leaving kudos.

To those of you who found their way to friending me on Tumblr and more, your friendship means more than I can say and I will never regret becoming part of this fandom if only to have become friends with all of you.

This last chapter was a labor of love and, for a couple of days, I honestly didn't know if I was going to be able to do it. It's been a hellacious week for me for a variety of reasons that culminated in me having a massive anxiety attack. But it was the thought of all of you that kept me going, that helped get me through it.

And, to that end, I have a few special shoutouts I want, *need* to make.

First, thank you so much to Lina (Fourth Horse/@linachupi), Janna (Janaynay/@formerlyjannafaye), and Val (@vwheeler) for almost literally picking me up when I was at my lowest these past few days, for letting me vent even while I was crying, for being so kind and sweet and looking out for me and checking up on me even though no one ever asked that of you. You mean the world to me, each of you, and I hope you never forget it.

And, finally, last but certainly not least, the light of my life, my darling Ely (EvieSmallwood/@mad-maxxy). I don't think this fic would be what it is without you, dear heart. Your influence literally shaped entire swaths of this story and I don't think it would be anywhere near as good if you hadn't been there for me every step of the way - as my sounding board, as someone I could vent to, as my cheering squad encouraging me and pushing me. Thank you so, so much for supporting me and being one of the best friends anyone could ever have. I count myself lucky that you're in my life and I hope we'll always be friends, no matter where life takes us. I love you so much, bitch. Never forget it.

So, before I go, I know a lot of you are probably wondering "what's next?" Well, I have an answer for that. In the notes at the end is the title and summary of my next fic. But I'm probably not going to get to working on it for a couple of weeks. I did the math (because, lol, *of course* I did) and, since I started this fic, I have written, on average, 2k words *a day* over the last 160 days. Suffice it to say, I'm a little burnt out. I need a break, need to mentally recharge and become more of a consumer of media than a creator of it. Not to say that I'm going anywhere, or that there won't be any activity (you never know, there might be a one-shot here or there), but I'm going to try to take the time. Besides, I really need to play the new God of War game that's been sitting on my PS4 for a week now.

Anyway, once again, thank you all SO MUCH for coming with me on this crazy, wacky journey.

Catch y'all on the flipside!

May 1, 1993 - Nov 4, 1994

El's floating on Cloud 9. There's just no way she could possibly be happier than she is in this moment. It's a beautiful night and she's

with all her family and friends celebrating the fact that she, El Hopper, is engaged to Mike Wheeler, the love of her life, the only man she ever wants to be with for all eternity.

The ring on her finger is a divine weight, a constant reminder that Mike loves her and wants to be with her forever. El doesn't know how long it'll take before the ring feels like it's part of her, but she hopes that at least a little bit of her will always marvel at it, will always be blown away by the beauty and touched by how perfect it is.

The diamonds glint in the light from the candles and strung bulbs above as El reaches for her family, greeting them with the giddiest of smiles on her face. Kali first, who's normal hairstyle contrasts so nicely with the simple, navy dress she's wearing, who whispers a quiet "congratulations" as they hug.

Then it's Joyce, who's all smiles and eyes filled with tears. "Oh, honey, I'm so happy for you!" she says into El's ear, her arms wrapped tightly around El.

El sniffs a bit, still not down from the high of the moment – *will she ever be?* – and hugs Joyce back, laughing a little through her tears. "I can't believe you're here!"

Joyce pulls back, hands on El's shoulders, and shakes her head. "Of course I'm here! Do you think I would miss the chance to celebrate your engagement?"

Her engagement. She's engaged. El almost can't believe it.

Out of the corner of her eye, El sees Hop and her breath catches in her throat as she turns to see him. Her tears renew themselves with enthusiasm as she sees him looking at her, smiling at her, the look on his face soft and fond and *proud*. "Hi Dad," she says, voice trembling as she pulls herself from Joyce's embrace.

"Hey, Ellie," Hop says as he reaches for her. El goes into his arms willingly, letting his hug engulf her in a cocoon of safety and warmth. El can't help the tears that escape from beneath her closed eyelids as she hugs him back, the fabric of his dress shirt soft beneath

her cheek. "I'm proud of you, kid. And happy, so happy."

El snuffles, unwilling to pull her arms away to wipe her face. God, she doesn't want to even know how her makeup looks right now. "Thanks, Dad. I'm so happy."

Hop presses a kiss to the crown of El's head and El has to swallow down the sob that bubbles up inside of her. "You deserve it."

El luxuriates in the hug from the man who took her in and kept her safe and raised her as his own, who did everything in his power to make sure she grew up happy and healthy, the only father she will ever acknowledge, the only one she'll ever want. "I can't believe Mike did all this," she says, pulling away, wiping under her eyes as she does so and trying desperately not to smudge her mascara (though she knows she's failing miserably).

"Oh, I can," Hop says, grinning, though there's a suspiciously glassy look in his eyes that makes El's heart give a painful squeeze in her chest. "That boy loves you so much. The both of you are going to be very happy together."

El giggles. "We already are, Dad. We'll just be married while we're happy."

Hop taps her forehead with the knuckle of his forefinger, but it's a gentle, teasing touch. "You know what I mean." He lowers his hand, sighing. "You're getting married," he says, sounding almost awed, like there's part of him that can't believe it, either.

El smiles up at him, still giggling. "I'm getting married."

El feels a hand on her arm and it's Joyce, fingers lightly clasped around her left wrist. "Well, let's see that ring! Jim said was beautiful, but I need to see it for myself."

El raises her hand for Joyce to see while she looks over at Hop, brows arching. "How did you know it was beautiful?"

Hop grins, one shoulder lifting in a shrug. "Mike showed it to me. When you two were home for Christmas break."

“What?” Wait, Mike’s had the ring for that long?

An arm wraps around El’s waist – *Mike* – and El turns to see her fiancé, giving Hop a look. “Hop, man, why are you giving away all my secrets?”

Hop barks out a laugh. “Congratulations, kid. Nicely done.”

Mike laughs in return. “Thanks. Told you I couldn’t do simple.”

But El is still focused on one *significant* detail. “You’ve had the ring since Christmas?”

Mike looks down at her and, as always, El feels her breath stolen away from her by her heart’s skipping beat – he’s just so handsome and beautiful and adorable and so many wonderful other adjectives that she can’t possibly list them all in one lifetime. “Since right after Thanksgiving, actually,” he says, smile turning sheepish. “I wanted to propose so many times. But I waited until it could be perfect.”

El’s throat feels too tight and she slips her hand from Joyce’s grasp so she can grab onto Mike and kiss him again. He falls into her easily, naturally, like gravity or magnetism or some other fundamental force. *He wanted it to be perfect.* El feels the sting of tears behind her closed eyelids and they’re tears of such overwhelming happiness. Because he loves her and she feels it with every breath, every touch. *I love you*, she whispers along their connection.

I love you, too. So much.

“Alright, Lover Boy, quit hogging your new fiancée. I wanna hug her.”

El pulls away just in time for Max to launch herself at her in a hug. “Congratulations, Ellie!”

“Thanks, Max,” El says with a smile.

Max pulls back and looks at El, lips twisting in a grin. “We gotta fix your makeup, El. You’re a *mess*.”

El lets out a snort. “Gee, thanks.”

“Just telling it like it is,” Max says before she looks up at Mike. “Can I steal your fiancée? I promise I’ll give her back.”

Mike arches an eyebrow. “I’m going to hold you to that, Mayfield.”

Max gives Mike a two-fingered salute before she pulls El in the direction of the cottage house, calling out over her shoulder. “Hey, Nancy! Come help us, will ya?”

“Coming!” Nancy calls back.

Soon, the three women are safely tucked away in the tiny cottage house that looks like something out of Secret Garden or Anne of Green Gables. There’s a small vanity tucked away in the corner and Max drags El over to it as Nancy shuts the door behind her.

“Ok, I want to see the ring,” Nancy says as El perches against the edge of the vanity, Max rummaging through a small toiletries bag next to her hip. “Gotta see if my brother has good taste or if I need to make fun of him for the rest of his life.”

El holds out her hand as she gives Nancy a pointed look. “Nancy, you’re going to make fun of him for the rest of his life *anyway*.”

Nancy grins as she takes El’s hand. “True, true. But I can always use the ammunition.” She looks down and her grin fades as she gasps. “Oh, that is pretty,” she says.

El leans over to look at her ring again, joining Nancy in marveling over the gold and diamonds. “Isn’t it, though?”

Nancy smiles softly, rubbing her thumb over the piece of jewelry. “He did good,” she says.

El grins. “You ever want one of these?”

“Maybe if my boys can figure out how to buy one together,” she says with a soft laugh. “Don’t need it, though.”

El makes a mental note to mention something to Jonathan and Steve, but just hums a sigh. “Well, you know they’d do anything for you.”

Nancy looks at El, her face happy. “I know.”

“Alright, Hopper,” Max says, grabbing El’s shoulders to rotate her so they’re looking face to face. “Now, you’re a few shades darker than I am, but I can blend it, I think.”

“Also, fix the mascara,” Nancy says. “Maybe touch up the eyeshadow. And lipstick, too?”

“Nah,” Max says. “Not unless you want your brother wearing half of it within 10 minutes.”

El rolls her eyes while Nancy laughs. “Fair point.”

It only takes a few minutes for Max to fix El’s makeup, during which El stays as still as possible while talking to Nancy. “Thanks for the outfit, Nancy.”

Nancy tilts her head, smiling sweetly. “You’re welcome, but it was all Mike’s idea. I just provided guidance.”

El fights to keep still, even though she wants to shake her head with incredulity. “I still can’t believe he did all this.”

“Oh, I can,” Nancy says.

“We *all* can,” Max chimes in under her breath as she focuses on applying a clean coat of mascara to El’s eyelashes.

“He loves you so much,” Nancy continues. “There’s nothing he wouldn’t do for you, El.”

El takes in a deep breath to keep from crying again – she really doesn’t want to ruin the work Max is in the middle of, least of it because Max would be *so annoyed* – but she can’t stop the way her heart feels like butterflies are just going to lift it away. “Well, that’s good, because there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for him.”

“You guys are so sappy,” Max says, teasingly, but fondly.

“Yeah, but you love us,” El says, lips curling in a grin.

“I do, I do,” Max says as she pulls back. “There, finished. Damage repaired. Now, let’s get back out there and celebrate that you’re getting hitched to the nerdiest nerd that ever nerded.”

He can’t stop staring at her.

It’s been a fun-filled evening of laughter and food and champagne and, through out it all, Mike can’t look away from El.

She’s *gorgeous*, practically glowing – all radiant and relaxed and looking happier than he’s ever seen her. The fact that he had any small part in making her so happy makes him feel like he could just float away.

El’s currently sitting at a table with Kali, Dustin, and Max, laughing while Kali shows them small, iridescent illusions with easy flicks of her fingers. There’s a glass of champagne cradled in her left hand and all it manages to do is emphasize the engagement ring on her finger.

Mike’s heart skips a beat as he zeroes in on the ring. He can’t even begin to describe the feelings that well up inside of him at the sight of the ring on her finger – *contentment, excitement, peace, belonging* are all words he can use, but none of them feels big enough. But he does know that, as beautiful as the ring looks on her, as much as it sparkles and glitters and shines, she outshines it. She’s his sun and nothing, *no one*, will ever be as beautiful as she is.

And then he hears her giggle in his head and he knows he’s been caught. Mike bites on the inside of his lip to keep his smile under check. He’s sitting at another table, ostensibly part of a conversation between Steve, Jonathan, and Lucas, but he’s barely even paying attention to what’s being said – something about...cars, maybe? Or, movies? He’s not sure – Mike’s just too wrapped up in *her* to really care.

You’re staring again, El says, voice light and teasing, happiness woven in every word.

So what if I am? You're beautiful and you're my fiancée. I'm allowed to stare.

Hmm, I suppose. El glances over at him and, for a brief moment, their eyes meet. The smile on her face is coy, loving, playful. *Hello there, future husband.*

Mike loses the battle to contain his smile, his lips stretching in what must be the goofiest grin. *Hello, future wife.* God, she's going to be his wife. How did he get so lucky?

A jolt at his shoulder pulls Mike from his mental conversation and back into the world right in front of him. "Quit making googly eyes at your fiancée," Lucas says. "Do that in the privacy of your own home, *please*."

Mike grins. *In the privacy of their home.* Yeah, making googly eyes at her will be the *least* of what he's going to do. "Hey, I just got engaged. Cut me a little slack." Mike takes a sip of his drink – he's still drinking champagne, even though Steve and Lucas have moved on to beer. "Besides, I wasn't just staring. We were talking."

At this, Lucas rolls his eyes. "Oh god, using your mental connection again. Still weird, man."

"And you're still just jealous," Mike says, lightly kicking Lucas under the table with the toe of his dress shoe.

"And that'll still *never* happen," Lucas says, tone a little combative, but it's undercut by the fact that he's smiling. It's a well-worn argument between the two of them, almost like a security blanket of familiar routines and easy banter.

"How does that work, anyway?" Steve asks, interrupting the two best friends.

"Yeah, and how did it start?" Jonathan follows up.

Mike barely holds back his laughter as Lucas levels a flat look at the two older men. "You just *had* to ask, didn't you?"

"We've had it forever, it feels like," Mike says, leaning back in his

chair as he plays with the stem of his champagne flute. “I think it got started because El was coming to me in the Void – that’s the place where El goes to find people with her powers, like a mental construct or something – and it just grew from repeat contact, like her mind connected to mine and that was it. She can pull people into the Void with her, so I’m sure that didn’t hurt that. We would use it to fall asleep with each other.”

Steve laughs, wagging his eyebrows. “Yeah, right, only sleeping?”

Mike arches an eyebrow and shrugs just a bit. “Yeah, ok, eventually, we used it for other things.” Mike settles back down and sighs. “I don’t know, it’s *nice*. Knowing I can talk to her at any time, knowing she can do the same, no matter where we are or how far apart we are from each other, being able to feel where she is...I never imagined it would be so nice being this connected with someone. It’s just... *amazing*.”

There’s a long silence at the table before Steve breaks it. “Wow, man, you are *really* far gone. Like, you are so far past whipped, it’s not even funny.”

Jonathan lets out a snort. “Please, like you aren’t in the same boat with Nancy.”

Steve pauses for a moment, considering. “Alright, you got me, Byers.”

“Are we just a bunch of fools hopelessly in love with the women in our lives?” Lucas asks, fingers playing at the edge of the label of his beer bottle.

Mike smiles. “Yeah, but we wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Eventually, the party comes to an end. Everyone goes off to bed for the night – be it at a hotel or at someone’s apartment – and then it’s just Mike and El, alone in the townhouse that they share, all newly engaged and so very in love...

...and absolutely *unable* to keep their hands from each other the second the front door shuts behind them. They manage to make it up to their bedroom, worshiping each other with their mouths and hands as they undress, clothes piling on the soft carpet beneath them. They tumble into bed full of happy giggles and breathless moans, pressed skin to skin, unable to stop kissing, mouths slanting hard against each other, eager and elated.

Their love-making that night is especially enthusiastic, all explosive passion and unrestrained exuberance. Somehow, being engaged makes it *different*, deeper, more openly intimate, a new layer painted over their already rich and overwhelming connection.

Afterwards, El lies beside Mike, struggling to catch her breath, a wide, satisfied smile on her face. *It's too bad they can't get engaged every day.* "Oh my god," she breathes. Her voice feels hoarse and she *desperately* needs water. But Mike's hand wraps around her hip, his thumb tracing delicious circles in the hollow between the bone, and El doesn't even want to think about moving.

"So you said," Mike says with a grin. "Multiple times. Along with 'oh yes', 'don't stop', and 'right there'. You're just a regular Chatty Cathy tonight. And *loud*, too. I think I'm going to go deaf in one ear."

El rolls her eyes. "Oh, hush," she says and lifts her left hand to give him a light back-handed smack. But Mike lifts his hand from her hip and grabs her hand before she can touch him, bringing it to his lips so he can press a light kiss to the back. His eyes lock onto hers as his lips linger and El feels her stomach swoop with a million butterflies. His gaze is rich, full of endless emotion – love, happiness, awe, desire – and El knows she'll never get enough of him, especially when he's looking at her like this.

Mike pulls her hand away, his thumb brushing over the ring on her finger. "It looks good on you," he says, voice raspy and low. Then he grins, all rakish and full of mischief. "In fact, if you could wear *nothing* but the ring for all eternity, I'd really love that, thanks."

El giggles. "Hmm, I think you just want me never to wear clothes again."

Mike laughs. "Well, there is that."

Full of giddiness that needs an outlet, El sits up and throws her leg over Mike's hip, effortlessly straddling him, the warmth of him bleeding into the backs of her thighs. Mike follows her, sitting up with his hands on her hips. The blankets are pushed down to the bottom of the bed and the only thing that covers them are her hair and the warm light from the lamp on the nightstand.

El links her hands behind Mike's neck and looks at him. From her perch, he's eye level with her and it's nice not to have to crane her neck to look him in the eye. She feels Mike's fingers gently caress the skin of her hips and she sighs. "We're getting married," she says, lips pulling up in a lovesick smile. God, she just loves him so much.

Mike smiles back, looking all besotted and beautiful. "We are."

El lets out another sigh, this one wrapped around a giggle, and pulls one hand from behind his neck to lightly caress his collarbone. He shivers beneath her touch and El can't help but let her gaze travel down, first to where she's touching him, and then further down. Even though he no longer participates in either the Cross Country or the Swim teams, Mike still makes time to run and swim at least a few times a week, his body still in shape – maybe not to the same degree as when he was competing, but still in a way that makes her tremble at the sight of. Her hand follows her gaze, her fingers dancing over his pecs, down his sternum, across the muscles of his abdomen, trailing along the dip of his obliques.

Mike lets out a groan, eyes closing in pleasure, mouth parting just so – *god, she loves it when he looks like this*. "El, what are you doing?"

El smiles. "What does it look like?" she asks as she leans in, her mouth brushing against the line of his jaw. "I'm seducing my fiancé." Mike tilts his head back so she can run her mouth down his neck, nibbling on the skin with her teeth, soothing the bites with her lips and tongue.

Right before she can push him back so she can more easily give his collarbones the same treatment, Mike moves suddenly, flipping them over so he's hovering over her. His hands come up to hold her

hands on either side of her head, fingers weaving together, her legs wrapping around his waist as he settles in the cradle of her thighs. He grins down at her, gaze dancing across her face, and El finds that she, once again, cannot breathe. “Consider me seduced,” he says, voice low and thrilling, before he captures her lips in an explosive kiss, a kiss that’s full of raw passion and almost indecent heat (and, given the fact that they’re completely naked, it’s a fitting descriptor).

El arches into it and let’s herself get swept away by the passion she stoked in him, in the love she has for him, in the knowledge that she’s going to be with him forever, that *they* are forever, transcending time and space and all earthly reason. Except that her and him together is the most natural thing in the universe.

El wraps her arms around him, lets him sink into her as she sinks into him, unable to tell – body, mind, and soul – where she ends and he begins. Her greatest wish is to be like this always, with him, in love and so, so happy, for all eternity – an impossible wish.

But she’ll *gladly* take being with him for the rest of her life.

May flies by in a flurry of final exams and preparing for graduation. The Party’s families all pour into Chicago to watch them receive their diplomas at their various universities, all of them proud, all of them wondering just where the time went.

As Max and Will prepare to enter the workforce, the rest of the Party experiences an idyllic summer. Yeah, sure, they’re all still working part-time jobs to help pay rent and buy groceries, but it’s mostly carefree, living day-to-day and moment-to-moment.

For Mike and El, it’s an overwhelmingly blissful time. It’s like they’ve fallen in love all over again, all unable to get enough of each other and being nauseatingly affectionate in front of everyone. They endure the rest of the Party’s never-ending eye rolls and not-so-subtle teasing because they know, underneath it all, the rest of the Party is happy for them, happy that they’re getting married – *finally, it’s about time*

you guys, you mean you aren't already married? – because why wouldn't they be happy?

As the summer progresses, Mike and El start the arduous journey of wedding planning, the first and most important steps of which deciding *when* and *where*. Luckily, it doesn't take them long to figure out the answer to either question.

It's the *where* they figure out first and the only place they can honestly think of to get married in is back in Hawkins, where they first met, where they fell in love, in a place full of the history of *them*, bad and good and everything in between.

The *when* takes them a little longer, but not by much. They narrow it down to three days: the anniversary of the day they met, of the day of their first kiss, and of the day she came back to him. They settle, after a series of long, back-and-forth conversations, on the day they've been celebrating their anniversary: November 4th. But, it's too soon to have it this year, in 1993 – it's already July and there's just not enough time to throw everything together in the way she wants and he feels she deserves. Besides, they're both starting grad school and it's just not the best time to be knee-deep in wedding planning.

So, they push it out to the following year. November 4th, 1994 will be the day that Mike Wheeler and El Hopper will become husband and wife, 10 years to the day after she came back into his life and never left, 10 years of building a life and a love together, culminating in the greatest celebration of them all: the celebration of matrimony.

Figuring out where and when Mike and El are getting married, however, is not the only significant thing that happens that summer.

There's one more circle that still needs closing...

Max twists this way and that as she stands in front of the bathroom mirror, hoping, *praying*, that this is good enough for her first day at her new job.

When she interned at Callister Ad Agency last summer, Max had gone out of her way to excel at whatever job was thrown her way. With a double degree in Marketing and Finance, she *knew* she would be a perfect fit for a permanent job. So, when they offered her a job as a marketing analyst before her last fall semester was even over, Max was over the moon. A full-time, adult job was going to be waiting for her when she graduated. No more career fairs, or networking seminars, or *any* of it.

Once she'd gotten the job offer, Max had immediately started saving what little money she could scrounge together after paying bills and rent. Because as much as she has the talent to do the job, Max also knows how she looks is just as important as how smart she is. Especially because she's a woman. And it fucking *sucks*. But, it's how to play the game and, if there's one thing Max is good at, it's learning the rules to use them against the game against itself.

So, with gift money from graduation and what she managed to save up, Max had gone shopping, hitting a handful of department stores to cobble together the beginnings of a professional wardrobe: a handful of blouses, a couple of pant suits, a skirt suit, a few pairs of heels. The styles aren't as bad as what her mom wears, but Max is reminded of her mom nonetheless.

Don't worry about her today, Max thinks to herself as she nods at her reflection. The khaki slacks and jacket, paired with the white blouse, look good against her skin and with her hair. Her makeup is light and minimal, and her hair is pulled back in a low ponytail. All in all, she looks professional.

And, maybe in time, she'll feel it, too.

Satisfied for the moment with how she looks, Max pads barefoot out of the bathroom and through the bedroom where Lucas is still sleeping. Her heels are stashed by the front door and she'll put them on last thing before walking out the door, since she doesn't want to

wake Lucas by walking across the wooden floors of their apartment with high heeled shoes on.

Max spares a glance at the man still sleeping in bed and she sighs. It's been warm, and the AC unit has been working on overdrive, and it's *still* warm in the apartment, so Lucas has completely kicked off the covers in his sleep, the blankets bunching down by his feet as he sleeps sprawled out on his stomach, head pillowed on one arm, completely and beautifully naked.

Max desperately wants to join him, wants to curl up against the smooth lines of his torso and wrap her arms around him. But she has to be in the office – *holy shit, the office* – by 8:30 and it's already 7:15. She still needs to eat breakfast and get some coffee into her. No time for snuggling up with hot, sleepy boyfriends.

Max leaves Lucas behind, feeling part of her stay behind with him, as she goes out to the kitchen to finish getting ready.

She's eaten breakfast and has just finished her coffee when she hears the sound of footsteps coming down the hall and she grins as Lucas comes into view, dressed in a pair of plaid boxers, one hand rubbing sleep from his eye. "What are you doing up?" Max asks as she goes over to him, silent laughter shaking her shoulders.

"Wanted to wish you good luck before you went to your first day," Lucas says, his voice even lower with the remnants of sleep.

Max wraps her arms around his waist and she lets out an amused coo. "Aww, you're sweet," she says as she lifts up onto her toes to brush a soft kiss against his lips. "You didn't have to do that."

Lucas smiles. "But I wanted to," he says, bringing his hands up so his palms are lightly cupping her cheeks. "You're gonna knock them dead, working girl."

Max giggles. "Are we talking more Sigourney Weaver or Melanie Griffith?"

"I don't know," Lucas says, rolling his eyes with a huffed sigh. "Whichever one is more like you."

“Hmm,” Max says, thinking. “I’m like a combination: the status of Melanie with the ball-busting of Sigourney.”

Lucas chuckles. “If you say so. I still haven’t seen that dumb movie.”

“Hey,” Max chides. “‘Working Girl’ is an excellent movie that critiques the challenges women face in the workforce and what it takes to make it as a professional woman. It’s not dumb.”

“It’s a romantic comedy starring Han Solo. That’s all that I know about it,” Lucas says.

Max laughs. “You’re such a nerd,” she breathes, rising up onto her toes to kiss him.

“Yeah, but you love it,” Lucas says, meeting her halfway in a jolting, heart-pounding kiss that does more to wake her up than the coffee she just finished drinking. Max presses herself against him, her fingers lightly curling into his skin, hearing him groan at the gentle scrape of her nails against his back. God, she wants to go back to bed with him and make him make that noise *again*. And, from the way one of his hands slides against the nape of her neck, fingers toying with the hairs there, he wants the same thing.

But, Max has to go to work. Sexy times are going to have to wait.

Max ends the kiss, lowering herself back down onto her heels, and looks up at Lucas with a pout. “Rain check?”

Lucas grins, eyes dark and knowing. “Oh, you can count on it.” He gives her one last peck. “Now, go get ‘em.”

“Can do, boss,” Max says, giving Lucas a flirty salute with just her index finger before she slips on her heels, grabs her new leather folio and her purse and slips out the door with a final wave to Lucas.

It doesn’t take Max long, relatively speaking, to get to her new office building. There’s a single transfer point she needs to take on the L, but she makes it with no problem and, soon, she’s walking up the glass doors of the skyscraper that her new employer is located in.

There’s a quick check in at the security desk, a new badge for the

building with her name and picture on it, and then Max is heading up the elevator to the 15th floor, her grip on her folio just a little too sweaty for comfort. But Max manages to play it cool as she steps out of the elevator with a bunch of other people, looking like she belongs as she follows the herd through the familiar doors of the office suite.

But, while everyone else keeps on walking, Max approaches the receptionist's desk and clears her throat. "Excuse me?"

The woman, probably in her late thirties, hair expertly coifed, looks up at Max's interruption. She's not the same receptionist that was there last summer when Max interned. "May I help you?"

"Yes, I'm a new hire and today's my first day. Maxine Mayfield?" She hates, *hates* her full name, but it's what's on her employee record.

The receptionist takes a look down at her computer screen and taps a few keys. "Yes, Ms. Mayfield, we've been expecting you. Please, have a seat over in the waiting area. We're still waiting on a couple more people for your new hire orientation."

Max gives the woman her thanks before she goes to sit down in one of the leather arm chairs that passes as a waiting area. There are a few more people sitting there, all men around her age – *great*, Max thinks, resisting the urge to roll her eyes – and she settles in for a bit of a wait, using the time wisely to pick at her fingernails (there's a gaming magazine in her folio that she could read that she was originally intending to save for her lunch break, but she resists the urge).

But then, a few minutes later, another person comes into view and sits down, causing Max to look up at the newcomer-

-and when she does, her jaw drops. "Megan?"

Chicago is *literally* the last place Megan Shaughnessy ever thought she'd end up. When she'd been looking for jobs after graduation,

she'd focused her search on New York, thinking that, with her degree in Marketing and Design, that'd be the most logical place to end up.

But, when Callister Ad Agency offered her a position in their Chicago office, not New York, including relocation expenses, well...Megan couldn't say *no*. It was too good an offer to pass up. So, Megan gladly accepted and now she finds herself living in Chicago.

And she can't say that it's not all sorts of awkward, even if she's the only one aware of it.

Because there's a high likelihood that Dustin Henderson is still living in Chicago and Megan's not afraid to admit, if only to herself, that there's a significant part of her that's still in love with him.

Megan's not even sure if he's still in Chicago, to be honest. The last she spoke to him was one awkward run-in during summer break between junior and senior year of college. Actually, awkward was an *understatement*. It had been...overly polite and stilted as they asked each other how they were doing and made small talk like they hadn't been dating for 3 years, like they hadn't been in love with each other (like they weren't *still* in love with each other).

It had been a mutual decision to break up – really, the physical difference separating them was harder to deal with than either her or Dustin could have anticipated and, even though they tried, *really* tried, it was just too much of a strain. So, they decided together, during a conversation that involved a lot of tears and hugging and one last round of the most bittersweet love-making Megan's *ever* experienced, that they were going to break up. And, for a while, it seemed that was that.

Megan tried dating other people during the rest of her time at Boston University, but none of the guys she went out with ever made it past the second or third date. *Maybe I'm just not in the right place for a relationship*, she thought at the time.

But she knew the answer. She still does, really.

Megan's not over him. And it makes her wonder if it's worth trying to find where he is, if he's still in Chicago, if she should look him up.

But she hesitates, panics over the thought of doing so. What if Dustin has moved on? What if he's with someone else? What if he's *in love* with someone else?

It's these thoughts that circle around inside her head when she thinks about finding out what Dustin is up to. It's not like she doesn't have ways finding out or doesn't know people to ask who would be more than happy to tell her. But Megan doesn't know if she's brave enough to discover what's on the other end of those questions.

So, as she prepares to move to Chicago, she doesn't ask. And she tries so, so hard not to think about Dustin or where he is or if he's happy.

But, as Megan wanders the streets of Chicago, familiarizing herself with her new home, she feels like she sees him *everywhere* and she finds herself unable to stop thinking as she goes into every new place, tries every new thing, *has Dustin been here before?*

It's almost maddening, really, just how much of her brain is taken up with this. But, luckily, the frenzy of moving and unpacking and getting ready for her first day at work suck up enough energy that Megan can mostly ignore the running commentary in the back of her head. *Mostly*.

Which is why it's the biggest surprise of Megan's life when, after she checks into Callister Ad Agency's reception desk, she runs into Max Mayfield. And her heart leaps into her throat.

"Max?" Megan calls out after the sound of her own name pulled her attention to the gorgeous redhead. "Oh my god!"

Max stands up from the leather armchair she's sitting in, her stuff on the floor by her feet, and walks over to Megan. The two immediately wrap each other up in a hug, arms tight. "What are you doing here?" Max asks as they pull away.

Megan grins. "Good to see you too, Max."

"Please, that's a given," Max says, rolling her eyes.

Megan laughs, shaking her head. Some things never change.... "I'm here for work, first day. You?"

Max's jaw drops a bit, but she's still smiling and it's the happiest incredulous look Megan's ever seen on a person's face. "Same," she says, almost breathing out the word. "Small world, yeah? I almost can't believe it."

"Of all the places, huh?" Megan says.

"Tell me about it," Max says, lips curling in a grin.

"It's totally chance I ended up here, too," Megan said. "I originally applied for a job at the New York office, but then they told me there was a spot on a new team in Chicago and, when they told me they'd pay for relocation...." Megan trails off with a shrug. "Offer was too good. Plus, Chicago's cheaper to live in than New York *and* it's closer to home, which makes my mom happy."

"Naturally," Max says. "Won't lie and say the decision to stay in Chicago wasn't in part because it's relatively close to family."

The decision to stay in Chicago. Megan knows, as well as anyone who's encountered the Party, that where one of them is, the rest aren't far behind.

Which means, odds are, Dustin really *is* still in Chicago.

And, suddenly, Megan feels a little lightheaded. *Oh.*

But, before she can ask about him, struggling to figure out the most natural, casual way of doing so, someone from HR comes to round everyone up for their new hire orientation and, for a few hours at least, Megan's distracted with absorbing as much information as she can about her new role as a marketing analyst on this new team that's been formed.

It's lunch when Megan has a chance to breathe, a chance to think about something beyond work. And, when she sits down for lunch with Max, Megan realizes that she *has* to know, even if it means potentially embarrassing herself. "So, how's everyone? You guys still call yourself 'the Party'?"

Max rolls her eyes. "The boys do," she says. "El goes along with it because, duh, Mike. It slips out of my mouth more often than I care

for, but, it is what it is,” she says with a shrug.

“You and Lucas still together, then?” Megan asks. “I won’t bother asking about Mike and El because, *really*.”

Max laughs. “Oh, you got that right.” She pauses, smiling. “They just got engaged a couple of months ago, actually.”

Megan rolls her eyes. “You mean they aren’t already married?”

“That’s what I said!” Max says with a sharp, victorious laugh. “I mean, Wheeler had been saving up for a ring since *high school* – like, no fucking joke, he was keeping the money in a metal tin in his closet – so I figured the *second* he asked her to marry him, he’d be dragging her down to the courthouse or something. It’s not like they don’t already *act* married.”

Megan lets out a giggle. “They always did, even back in high school.”

“Yeah, lucky it’s a cute look on them,” Max says. “But, anyway, yeah, Lucas and I are still together. We have our own apartment and everything.”

Megan smiles. “That’s great, I’m happy for you two.”

Max shrugs, but she’s smiling. “Yeah, a few bumps and bruises, but we made it.”

“What about the others? How are they doing?” It’s the closest Megan can bring herself to asking directly about Dustin. Any closer and she’ll die of embarrassment.

“They’re good,” Max says, giving her a knowing look. “Will has a boyfriend that he’s been living with for a couple of years now – you knew he was gay, right?”

“He never told me directly,” Megan says, thinking back to all the memories she has of Will Byers. “Though it was painfully obvious if you knew well enough to look. I’m glad he has someone, though.”

“Yeah, they’ve been together since our freshman year and they’re just adorable,” Max says. “And Dustin...well, Dustin’s *Dustin*. Doing his

own thing, trying not to act like the awkward 7th wheel.”

Megan’s heart skips a beat. “He’s not seeing anyone?” God, did that sound as desperate as she thinks it did?

The look Max is giving her tells Megan that the answer is a resounding yes. “Nope, not at the moment. And not really at all since you two broke up. Have you talked to him recently?”

Megan cringes. “Well, there was one really awkward run-in back in Hawkins last summer, but since then? No, not at all.”

Max grins. “Well, you should come over sometime when the whole gang’s together, say hi, catch up. I’m sure Dustin would love to see you.”

Megan narrows her eyes at Max. “What are you playing at?”

“Nothing,” Max says with a shrug, but the coyness in her voice is a dead giveaway. “Just thought it would be nice for you to catch up with old friends. And besides,” Max says with a pointed look. “You can’t tell me you don’t still care about him. You’re *painfully* obvious.”

Megan cringes. “Dammit. Am I really that bad?”

Max looks at her for a long silent moment. “No, probably not. I’m just really observant, so I noticed. El probably will, too. But the others?” She shrugs. “They’re boys, they won’t notice.”

Megan lets out a sigh of relief. “Thanks for scaring the crap out of me, Max.”

“No problem, anytime,” Max says with a smile. “Anyway, you want me to invite you over sometime? Really, I can guarantee that it wouldn’t just be Dustin who’s happy to see you. Besides, it’ll give us someone to help overpower the incredible schmoopiness that is Mike and El. Yes, I know they’re only two people, but they’re lovey dovey enough for 10 and it’s *sickening*.”

Megan laughs. “Yeah, that sounds about right.” She pauses, taking in a deep breath. “But, yeah, sure. Just let me know when and where to be and I’ll be there.”

The only question is: is she going to be ready to see him again?

God, she hopes so.

It's a Wednesday night and the temperature's perfect for a backyard barbeque. The Party plus Greg (who's practically a Party member himself, though he refuses to use the phrase because *nerds*) are gathered at Mike and El's for dinner, Will and El taking over the kitchen, swapping between the two of them who gets to man the grill for cooking burgers while the other focuses on making sides inside.

The backyard is big enough to fit a table that can seat them all if they squish a bit (which none of them mind – worst comes to worse, El can sit on Mike's lap and *neither* of them will complain a single iota) and, soon, the backyard is filled with good food and even better conversation.

Dustin's content and happy – belly full of burgers, a cool beer in one hand, surrounded by his friends – really, it couldn't be better.

(he tries to ignore the tiny, burning pit of envy deep in his stomach at seeing all the happy couples that surround him. he's mostly successful)

But then he feels a smack on his shoulder, one that's a little harder than strictly necessary, and he glares over at Max. "God, *Maxine*," he says, annoyed. "What?"

"There's something I forgot to tell you, dumbass," Max says with a huff

Dustin feels his eyebrows push upwards. "And, somehow, that's *my* fault?"

At last Max has the grace to look a *little* sheepish. "Sorry," she says. "But, really, there is something I need to tell you. Something I think you're really going to want to hear." There's a sing-song quality to her voice that is cruel with its teasing and Dustin's already tired of it.

“Max, you know I love you, right? But, for the love of God, *please*, can we just cut to the chase, already?”

Max lifts one shoulder in a deceptively delicate shrug before she spits it out. “Megan Shaughnessy is my new coworker.”

And Dustin nearly drops his beer in surprise.

“Wha-what?” Dustin looks around at the rest of the table, but everyone else is talking and doesn’t seem to have heard the bombshell Max has just dropped on him. “My Megan?”

Max rolls her eyes. “She’s not your *property* or anything, but yeah, that Megan.”

Dustin’s heart skips several beats in his chest. Megan Shaughnessy, the one who got away. The woman he compares everyone else to.

The woman he thinks he might still be in love with, even though he’s tried so very, *very* hard not to be.

And she’s in *Chicago*.

Dustin closes his eyes for a brief moment to try and bring himself under some measure of calm and collected, knowing he’s probably failing miserably (but he has to try, *dammit*). He wonders how she is, what she looks like – *probably still just as beautiful* – if she still thinks about him, if she misses him, if she’s seeing anyone, if, if, if....

“I invited her over sometime,” Max says, her voice softening just a bit, and Dustin realizes he must be giving away way more of his feelings than he’d intended to.

Dustin opens his eyes, heart leaping into his throat. “Yeah?” Ok, *that* sounded desperate. And...did his voice crack a little? Jesus, it’s not like he didn’t just turn 22, or anything.... “Did, she, uh, say anything about me?”

Max glances up at the sky and sighs. “Oh, god, I’m surrounded.” She looks back down and levels a serious, but kind look over at him. “Okay, I’m going to do something really nice for you because I love you like you’re my brother, ok?”

Dustin cringes as a wave of revulsion shudders through him. “Oh, *god*, don’t compare me to your douchebag step-brother.”

“Dude, I don’t even consider him a *vertebrate*, much less a human being, never mind him being anywhere near my brother, so you’re good,” Max says. “You guys are more my family than my actual family is, but, we’re getting off track.” She points at him. “One, Megan’s not seeing anyone and that’s because, two, she still cares about you. I’d hazard a guess that she’s still in love with you, if I were a betting woman.”

Dustin snorts, even though his heart is thumping horribly inside his chest and every inch of him tingles with hope. “You *are* a betting woman. I’ve seen you play poker.”

Max tilts her head and quirks an eyebrow, conceding the point. “True,” she says. “So, take my word for it. She’s not over you, Dusty. It may have been over two years, but she’s still not over you. And you’re obviously as *fuck* not over her.”

Dustin nods, gulping. “Uh, ok, *wow*. This is, uh....”

“I know, right?” Max says. “I always liked her, by the way, especially when she defied Stacey’s little cult to date you. That took balls.” She sighs, shaking her head. “That’s beside the point. I take it you’re ok, then, if I invite her to hang with us sometime?”

Dustin smiles. “Max, I’d be offended if you *didn’t*.”

It’s the Friday of the end of Megan’s second full week of work and Max has invited Megan to go out with everyone for dinner and drinks, mostly to celebrate Max’s first paycheck (and, by extension, Megan’s, if she’s really thinking about it.)

A few days ago, Max wrote down an address on a piece of paper and dropped it on Megan’s desk, which is right next to hers. “This is the address for Mike and El’s place. Friday, 7PM, be there.”

Megan had looked over at Max with arched eyebrows and said, "What are we doing?"

"Meeting up for a couple of beers and then heading to this cute tapas place a few blocks over where we're going to drink lots of sangria and eat lots of food," Max says. "It's a lot of fun and it's a good way to get reintroduced to everyone. Besides, I don't think you've ever really seen everyone drink before. I mean, yeah we drank in high school and early college, but not *legally*. Besides, El's adorable when she's had too much sangria. She becomes just the cutest cuddlebug known to man and it's hilarious watching Mike try to wrangle her while also not giving a single shit about how his fiancée is hanging *all over him*. Really, this is something that everyone needs to see."

With that description, and the knowledge that Dustin will also be there, there's no way Megan's going to turn down the invite.

So, now she's standing in front of the cutely painted green front door to Mike and El's townhouse, only a couple of miles from her apartment, wearing what she hopes walks that fine line between cute and trying too hard – a soft, sea green A-line skirt and a white sleeveless blouse with a scooped neckline. *Don't want to look desperate, **really** don't want to look desperate.*

With hands that are a little bit clammy, Megan reaches out and rings the doorbell before quickly wiping her palm on her skirt.

The door opens to reveal El and, for just a moment, Megan's too excited about seeing her friend to worry about who else might be inside. "Megan!" El exclaims and, almost before Megan can blink, she finds herself wrapped in a tight hug.

A hug Megan immediately, and enthusiastically, returns. "El, oh my god! It's so good to see you!"

After a long moment, El pulls back, all smiles and sparkling eyes. "You look fantastic."

Megan takes in the sight of El standing before her, looking very similar to the last time Megan saw her – long, rich hair, svelte curves, only she's a little older, the last of childhood gone from her face...

and she has an engagement ring on her finger. “Thanks. You look great, too,” Megan says. “And congratulations on the engagement. Max told me all about it.”

If anything, El’s smile only widens. “Thank you. I almost still can’t believe it.”

“Oh, El, everyone could see you’d be here eventually,” Megan says, gently chiding. “Mike just loves you too much.” She pauses, grinning. “And, speaking of Mike, where is your lovable nerd?”

El giggles. “Out in the backyard. Everyone’s hanging out back there drinking beer. C’mon, they’re all waiting to see you.”

Megan follows El through the adorable townhouse she shares with Mike, with a brief stop to meet the two cute kitties Mike and El adopted, and Megan realizes her heart is pounding as she watches El step out through a narrow patio door just a few steps ahead of Megan. *This is it.*

Everyone stands when they see her and, for a little bit, Megan gets lost as she reunites with the people she hasn’t seen in a few years, getting hugs first from Mike, then Lucas and Will. She meets Greg, Will’s gorgeous boyfriend, and greets him with handshake where he clasps her hands in both of his like a gentleman – *oh, I can see why Will’s fallen in love with this one.*

But then she sees Dustin and her mind goes blank. He looks good, *really* good – better than she remembered. He’s dressed casually in khaki shorts and a pale blue, short sleeved button down, hair cut close along the sides of his head, the hair on top a bit longer, curling gently in a way that Megan wants to run her fingers through to see if it’s as soft as she remembers. His face has aged a bit, like everyone else’s has – the last vestiges of childhood giving way as adulthood fully takes over. With the last of the baby fat gone, Dustin looks more handsome than ever and Megan realizes just how unprepared she was to see him again.

And then he smiles and she thinks maybe she underestimated her underestimation. “Hey, Megan,” he says, softly and, what Megan hopes she’s hearing, fondly.

But she can't help but smile back. "Hi, Dustin." They step towards each other and then they're hugging and Megan's heart feels like it's going to burst out of her chest. She forgot just how good his hugs feel, all warm and solid, but gentle. Dustin's a half a foot taller than she is, so her head fits very nicely against the curve of his shoulder and Megan lets herself lean into it, just for a little bit. If she closes her eyes tight enough, she can feel the memory of his chin resting on the top of her head, can feel the vibrations of his voice as he talks with her head buried in his neck and Megan wants *so badly* to feel that again.

God, she missed him. So much.

The hug has to end eventually and, when Megan slips from Dustin's embrace, she realizes that everyone is looking anywhere *except* for at the two of them – *thanks for the privacy, guys*. "So, how are you doing?" Megan asks, resisting the urge to cross her arms over her chest. It's a nervous habit that she knows he knows about and Megan really doesn't want to give away everything she's feeling.

But the way Dustin is looking at her is enough to make her forget all about being nervous. He's smiling softly at her, almost incredulously, like he can't believe he's seeing her again. But he breathes out a laugh and gives a small shake of his head. "I'm good, I'm good. Preparing to start my master's degree with Lucas and Mike next month. How about you? How are you liking Chicago?"

Megan knows Dustin well enough – or she *did* at any rate – and she can hear the question behind the one he's asking. "It's good. Really good. I haven't explored much of the city, yet, but I've had a good time with what I've seen."

Dustin's smile widens, showing off the way his cheeks dimple and the way his lips curve. "Good, good. Yeah, it's a fantastic city. Lots to do. Different from Boston, though, I'm sure."

Megan giggles. "Yeah, different. But still good."

Still really, *really* good.

Dustin feels like he just floats through the evening, or like he's just out of phase by a degree or two – not really there, just out of sync.

There's one thing that's true, though – Megan Shaughnessy is still the most beautiful woman he's ever seen, all soft skin and lush curves and sparkling eyes. She's still so bright and bubbly and sweet, it makes Dustin yearn to be closer to her, to be around her, to let her presence swallow him with its light.

Really, the only difference is that her hair's shorter than it was the last time he saw her – down to just passed her shoulder blades instead of almost to her waist – but it's still like corn silk or spun gold. Dustin has so many memories of running his fingers through it and he has to stop himself he doesn't know how many times from reaching out to do just that.

It doesn't help whenever Megan catches his eye from where she's sitting across from him at dinner, all soft smiles, occasionally flirty, as she sips at her sangria and catches up with everyone. They're smiles he's seen a thousand times – sitting next to each other in the cafeteria back in Hawkins, when he picked her up to take her out on dates, when she laid beneath him as they lost themselves in each other....

Yeah, Dustin's in love with her. And, apparently, he's never *stopped*.

Explains why every attempt at dating over the past couple of years has ended in abject failure.

It's a fun night, despite Dustin's moon-eyed longing – a night he's loathe to end. But, there's only so many tapas they can eat, so much sangria they can drink and, at around 11, they close out and start the slow journey home.

Since the restaurant isn't far from Mike and El's place, they all decided to walk there, which is now proving to be something of a challenge to overcome since they're all a little three-sheets-to-the-wind.

From his spot towards the rear of the group, Dustin watches Mike try to keep El moving forward, despite her best attempts to climb him like a tree, and he laughs.

“She’s cute, isn’t she?”

Dustin looks to see Megan walking next to him, matching his pace. “You mean El?” Dustin smiles, breathing out a laugh. “Yeah, she’s adorable. And literally a handful right now.”

Megan scoffs. “Please, like Mike minds right now.”

“Oh, you won’t ever hear him complaining about her hanging all over him, that’s for sure,” Dustin says. “So, uh, you having a good time?”

Megan smiles and Dustin’s heart gives its strange little flip. “Yeah, this has been great. I’ve loved catching up with all of you guys.”

“Aww, you missed us,” Dustin says, chuckling.

But something in Megan’s face shifts, turning more serious than Dustin was expecting. “Yeah,” she says softly, just barely audible over the sounds of everyone else talking in front of them as they walk. “I did. I really did.”

“Good, yeah, um...good,” Dustin says, wishing he were maybe a little tipsier so he wouldn’t feel quite so awkward. “We missed you, too.”

“You all did, huh?” Megan asks, lips curled in a grin.

Dustin knows what she’s asking and he can’t start lying to her *now*. “Me, especially. I missed you.”

Megan’s grin softens and Dustin very suddenly wants to kiss her. “I missed you, too, Dustin.” She sighs. “I think a lot about what would have happened if we hadn’t broke up.”

“We’d probably hate each other by now,” Dustin says, surprised that they’re even having this conversation where anyone could overhear them. But no one’s paying attention to them from where they’re walking up ahead and Dustin feels safe. “The long-distance thing was wearing on us. If we tried to stick it out, we would have ended up

resenting it and just neither one of us would have been happy.”

Megan sighs, nodding. “Yeah, you’re right.” She eyes him. “Still doesn’t mean I don’t wonder about it.”

“Yeah, I think about that, too,” Dustin says. “But it was the best decision for us at the time.”

“Again, you’re right,” Megan says, letting out a small laugh.

There’s a long, awkward pause as they walk. And, just when it’s gotten to the point where it’s unbearable, Dustin starts talking.

But, Megan does too, and they talk over each other. “Hey I was wondering-”

“Do you think-?”

They pause again, looking at each other, before they both laugh and Dustin never wants this feeling to go away – being happy, being next to her. “You go,” he says after the laughter has faded.

Megan bites down on her lower lip and crosses her arms over her chest – *she’s nervous*. “I was gonna say, I was wondering if you think there’s a possibility we could give it another try.”

At that, Dustin stops in his tracks, Megan stopping just a step ahead of him, turning to face him. “You mean...*you and me?*” His stomach swoops uncontrollably, effervescence spreading through his veins.

Megan’s hand comes up to her hair, wrapping a lock around her finger in what Dustin knows is another one of her nervous tics. “Yeah, you and me.”

Dustin feels slack-jawed and he just stares at her for a moment before the words start spilling out. *Looks like Max was right*. “We’re not the same people we were when we broke up-” he starts.

Megan cuts him off, looking crestfallen. “No, yeah, of course. Sorry, stupid question.”

Megan turns to walk away, but Dustin reaches out and catches her by

the wrist, relishing the feel of her skin beneath his palm. "Will you let me finish?" he says, smiling. But Megan's looking up at him so hopefully it almost makes his heart hurt and Dustin rushes to keep talking. "Yeah, we're not the same people we were, but that doesn't mean we can't get to know each other again. Doesn't mean I don't want to get to know who you've become, see what there is to discover."

Megan smiles shyly, glancing down at the ground for a second before looking back up at him. "Yeah?"

"Yeah, I mean, we're adults, now. That's bound to be interesting to explore, you know?" Dustin says, grinning so widely his cheeks almost hurt from the force of it.

Megan giggles, a sound that makes Dustin feel like he's floating and, almost before he knows what's happening, she's kissing him, her hands linking behind his neck to hold him close to her. Dustin's breath hitches in his chest at the feel of her lips against his, soft and full and warm. He's frozen, almost in shock, *happy disbelief*, for a breathtaking moment before he kisses her back, groaning against her mouth. He missed this, *so much*. His hands go to hold her close to him, one at her hip, the other sliding into her hair, strands sifting through his fingers, the feel of her in his arms thrilling and familiar all at the same time and Dustin never, *ever* wants this to end.

But, slowly, the kiss ends and Dustin pulls back to notice that both of them are breathless. Megan's smiling radiantly up at him and Dustin has to imagine that he's looking at her the same way. "The others are probably long gone by now, huh?" Megan says, one hand gliding down from the back of his neck to rest on his chest, her lips twisting in a coy grin.

Dustin spares a fraction of a second to look past her shoulder and he spots the rest of the Party, almost a full block away. "Yeah, we've been left behind."

Her grin widens, turns playful. "Good," she says, biting her lip, like she's trying to contain the smile on her face. "So, I know we probably shouldn't rush this, but would it be horrible if I invited you over to my place?"

Dustin chuckles. "My, my, how forward," he teases even as he feels like he's going to explode with happiness.

"Yes, tis I, a woman of moral repute," Megan quips, giggling. "Seducing you with my wanton ways."

"Seducing, huh?" Dustin says, eyebrows waggling. "Been a while. Sure you haven't forgotten how?"

Megan arches an eyebrow at the challenge in Dustin's voice and reaches up to brush a sweet, *hot* kiss across his lips. "Come home with me and see for yourself."

Dustin gasps before swallowing thickly. "Where do you live?" And, when Megan answers, Dustin grins. "My place is closer," he says. "By about 5 minutes, but...."

"Hey, that's 5 minutes less we have to wait," Megan says. She brings her hand up to cup his cheek, the heat in her gaze softening to warm fondness, eyes full of hope. "And then, tomorrow, you can take me out to dinner."

Dustin laughs out loud at that one. "I can take you? Which one of us is fully employed, again?"

Megan lets out a giggle. "Fine, fine, we can go dutch."

"Or, I could take you out to brunch. Or make you breakfast in bed, whichever."

Megan tilts her head to one side, considering, the smile on her face giddy and full of light and happiness. "How about we play it by ear, see what happens? Besides, we don't know, the passion could have faded by then."

Dustin smiles. The hand on her hip slides up to press against the small of her back, fingers caressing her through the thin fabric of her blouse, eliciting a small gasp that has Dustin shivering a bit. "Oh, I don't know about that. I have a feeling we'll be just fine, there. And with everything else."

As it turns out, he's right.

*(despite the way they hop back into bed with each other, dustin and megan will take the rest of it slowly, getting to know each other piece by piece, learning how their new edges and angles fit together. after a few happy, blissful months, where it's only getting better with each day that passes, dustin finally lets megan in on the secret of el's powers, letting her fully, **finally**, into the party. in time, there will be marriage and a family and **life** and, though they'll always mourn the time they spent apart, there will always be a part of them that is also grateful for it, that it allowed them to reconnect in ways that only makes their relationship deeper, stronger. and, really, how couldn't they be grateful for that?)*

Summer turns into fall and, for a good portion of the Party, fall means the start of grad school. Max and Will watch as the others dive back into the routines of school, now with the added layer of being teaching assistants and helping conduct research.

And all throughout the days of classes and research and grading papers and leading discussion sessions, Mike and El continue to plan for their wedding the following year, though it's mostly talk without a lot of concrete planning – that'll wait until they're a little closer.

But, there's one other thing they settle on pretty early, not long after they start back at school: the arrangement of their wedding party.

“So, obviously, Max is going to be my maid of honor.”

Mike lets out a snort as they lay in bed one evening in early December. El's on her back while Mike is stretched out on his side next to her. He has one arm draped low over her stomach, hand wrapped around her hip, while El caresses his forearm with the fingers of one hand. “Does Max know that?”

El shrugs. “She'll do it. Especially because I'll ask her to.”

Mike can just see how that conversation is going to go and he laughs. “You know, if you ask her to be your maid of honor, you’re giving her permission to plan your bachelorette party.”

El grins. “I can handle whatever she throws at me. Besides, I *want* her to be my maid of honor. And then, I was thinking I could have Nancy be my bridesmaid. Oh, and Holly as the flower girl.”

Mike frowns a bit. “No one else on your side? Because I wanted Will, Lucas, and Dustin on my side and I don’t know if my mom’s going to be happy with uneven wedding parties.”

El lets out a low hum and Mike can practically see the wheels turning in her head. “Well, what if we found another role for one of the guys to fill, like...” El trails off with a gasp, lips curling in a smile. “Oh, Mike. I have a *great* idea.”

Will is really confused when El calls him on Saturday morning and says that she and Mike want to talk to him about something.

“Oh, is everything ok?”

“Yeah,” El says, her voice a little muffled over the phone line. “Oh, yeah, everything’s fine. It’s just...we have something we wanted to ask you and, well, we didn’t want to do it over the phone.”

Will looks behind him into the kitchen, where Greg is just shuffling in, wearing only a pair of flannel pajama pants that are slung low on his hips – *well, hello gorgeous* – to grab himself a cup of coffee out of the pot Will just brewed a few minutes ago. “Well, why don’t you two come over for breakfast? I was just about to make some for me and Greg. Wouldn’t be too hard to make extra for the both you.” As Will watches, Greg turns to look at him, sleep still lingering around the edges of his face, and raises his eyebrows in question. Will holds up a finger in the universal “just a second” gesture and focuses on hearing El’s reply.

“Well, if you don’t mind, that sounds nice. Thank you,” El says.

Will shrugs. “Wouldn’t have offered if I minded. See you in a bit?”

“30 minutes, tops,” El says. The siblings say their goodbyes and then Will hangs up the phone on his way over give his boyfriend a good morning kiss.

“Morning, gorgeous,” Will says, rising up just enough to press his lips to Greg’s in a lingering kiss, his arms wrapping around Greg’s bare torso.

“Mmm, morning,” Greg says, voice thick with sleep. “What was that about? On the phone?”

Will leans against Greg, letting Greg’s warmth bleed into him. “El and Mike are coming over. There’s something they want to ask me in person, so I invited them over for breakfast.”

Greg’s arms settle around Will’s shoulders, holding him close. “Hmm, well there goes all my breakfast-in-bed fantasies with my sexy boyfriend.”

Will pokes Greg in the ribs. “Goober,” Will says, though he feels his face warm up with a flush. Even though it’s been almost 4 years, Will still manages to get flustered by the compliments Greg continues to pay him.

“Truth teller, you mean,” Greg retorts. “I wonder what they want, though? Is everything ok?”

Will shrugs against the underside of Greg’s arms. “I think so. At least, they didn’t sound like anything was wrong. I’m curious, though. I wonder what they didn’t want to ask over the phone?”

Greg pulls back just enough to press another kiss to Will’s lips. “Well, let me put on a shirt so I can help you make breakfast.”

Will grins. “Aww, do you have to?” But Greg just gives him a *look* and slips back into their bedroom to grab a shirt.

As they both drink their coffee, Will and Greg throw together the

ingredients for a quick frittata and a fruit salad, Will also making sure to put on a fresh pot of coffee.

And, about a half an hour later, there's a knock on the front door and Will rushes to action. "I'll get it!" He bounds over to the door and throws it open, an eager smile on his face as he spots Mike and El, dressed casually in jeans and sweatshirts. "Hey, guys, come on it! Breakfast should be ready soon." Will steps aside so Mike and El can step inside before he closes the door.

"Morning, Will," Mike says.

"Yeah, morning," El says. "Smells great in here. Did you need any help with anything? Like, setting the table or something?"

"Nah, I got it," Will says. "You can tell me why you're here while I set the table, though."

Mike and El share a look as they follow Will further into the apartment, a sign they're mentally conversing, before Mike looks over. "No hurry," Mike says. "Let's have breakfast first."

The conversation turns to lighter things – how Mike and El's classes are going as they head towards finals, what's going on at the gallery Will and Greg work at, what commissions both of them have, how Mike and El's wedding planning is going.

It's only when Greg stands up and presses a kiss to Will's cheek with a murmured, "I'm going to go take a shower," that Mike and El finally get to why they asked to come over.

"Alright, spill it," Will says, grinning as he leans his elbows on the table. "You have no audience, so no need to worry about how anyone else is going to react. But the anticipation is killing me, so c'mon. Hit me."

Mike and El share *another* look before they look back at Will. El reaches out and grabs Mike's hand without looking, smiling at Will softly, almost beseechingly. "So, we've been trying to figure out who's going to be in the wedding party. And, well, there's only two people on my side."

“So we were trying to figure out how to balance, since I wanted all you guys on my side,” Mike says.

“But then, well, I realized there was something you could do that would mean the world to me, to *us*,” El says.

Will can't help but notice the way his heart sinks, just a bit. *Well, there goes being Mike's Best Man*, he thinks with disappointment. But they still haven't asked him what they wanted yet. “Well, what is it?” Will asks, knowing that he'll happily do whatever he can for their wedding.

“We want you to officiate. We want you to be the one to marry us, Will,” El says. “You're my brother.”

“And my best friend,” Mike chimes in.

“And, this way, I get to have you there for *me*, as well. I can't think of anyone else I would rather have officiate our wedding than you,” El says, softly, smiling with a thin sheen of tears in her eyes as Mike looks on, hopeful etched across all the features of his face.

The words take a bit to sink in but, when they do, Will feels his jaw drop. They want him to marry them? To be the person to lead them through their vows? *Wow*. Emotion, thick and heavy, swells in Will's chest and he's so *touched*, he almost doesn't know what to do with himself. “Guys, I don't know what to say, just...I mean...is that even possible? I'm not a priest or anything, I just...how?”

“Anyone can get ordained for a day,” El says. “Just takes filling out some paperwork, easy peasy. But, will you do it? It would mean so much if you would.”

Will's face breaks out in a huge smile and he gets to his feet in a rush, Mike and El following suit. “Guys, I would be *honored* to officiate your wedding,” he says, going over to hug El, his arms wrapping tight around his sister as she hugs him back so, so tight. He can hear her snuffle a bit in his ear and he hugs her just that much tighter.

“Oh, *thank you*, Will,” El says, voice thick with tears.

Will lets go so he can go hug Mike. “Yeah, thank you,” Mike repeats.

“This means a lot. Like, you have no idea.”

“Oh, I think I have some idea,” Will says, unable to stop smiling. His best friend and his sister, two of his greatest heroes, want *him* to officiate their wedding. God, it’s almost too much and he’s starting to feel overwhelmed. “So,” Will says after he pulls back from hugging Mike. “This means I get to give a small speech at your wedding, right?”

Mike laughs. “As long you remember our parents are going to be in audience, have at, man.”

Will rolls his eyes. “Please, what do you take me for?” Like he’d give an inappropriate speech at their *wedding*.

...He’ll just save the *horrible* stuff for Mike’s bachelor party. And, oh boy, does he have some stories he wants to tell....

It’s like El looks away for a second and, suddenly, it’s almost March, a little more than 8 months to go before the wedding. And El can’t help but marvel at the way time flies when you’re busy.

There’s one thing for sure, though, and that’s that she loves Library Science. Learning about information storage and research methods is just so incredibly satisfying – a way for her to impose order on chaos, to give her a measure of control she never really knew she needed until now. For the first time, El can see what her future is *really* going to look like, what her career path is going to be and it’s relieving to know she has a place in the world besides being by Mike’s side (which is gratifying and enriching for a whole different set of reasons, but it’s still nice to know she has a way of standing on her own even if she doesn’t want to).

But, as winter starts, very reluctantly, to give way to spring, there’s another exciting and very important milestone that El needs to check off: buying a wedding dress.

Thrilled at the prospect, and armed with a budget of \$1000 from Hop, El drags a partly reluctant Max and a very excited Megan out wedding dress shopping the last weekend of February.

“Tell me why I need to go with you for this? It’s not like I know anything about wedding dresses.”

El rolls her eyes at Max from her spot in the passenger seat, Max driving the car, Megan giggling from the backseat. “Well, one, because you’re my maid of honor. And, two, I rely on you to give me your honest opinion. If a dress looks bad, I want to know and I want to know fast. I know you won’t let me buy something ugly.”

Max snorts. “Please, you could make anything look beautiful,” she says, but she looks at El out of the corner of her eye and smiles. “But, I see your point.”

“Well, I’m just excited you asked *me* to go along with you,” Megan says. “I know I’m not in your wedding party, or anything, but it’s still fun to get swept up in all of this.”

El turns around to look at Megan. There’s a part of her that regrets not having Megan in her wedding party, since almost everyone else is, but it’s complicated and as much as she loves Megan, there’s a magic in who was chosen to stand up with Mike and El when they get married.

Besides, El has conscripted Megan into being her de facto wedding planner, since El knows how easy it’s going to be for her to get overwhelmed with all the minutiae of putting on a wedding and she also knows Megan has an eye for those details that El just lacks. “Well, I need your opinion, too,” El says, grinning. “You have a better eye for fashion than this one over here,” El says, jerking her thumb at Max.

“Hey, I’m driving, you know. I can very easily turn us around and go home,” Max says, grumbling in the way that El knows is completely playful...mostly.

“My apologies, oh magnanimous one,” El teases. “I’m so sorry I offended you. Please, I beg for your forgiveness.”

Max arches her eyebrows. "Ok, you've either been spending way too much time with your nose in some dusty old Brit Lit novel...or Dustin's sense of drama has infected you."

"Don't insult the boyfriend, Max, *please*," Megan says.

"Yeah, don't insult the boyfriend," El echoes, giggling and smiling.

Max sighs. "Fine, sorry." She grumbles. "God, the things I put up with for you people, I *swear*."

It's only a few more minutes until Max is pulling into the parking lot for one of those large, wedding dress chain stores – El's first choice, really, just to get a sense of what's out there. She doesn't know if she's going to find *the one* today, but this will at least give her a starting point for where to go from here.

The three make their way inside, huddled against the last of the winter's chill, and stop at the sight that awaits them.

"Oh. My. *God*," Max breathes. "I have *never* seen so much lace and frill and *fluff* in my entire life. God, it's like a fairy unicorn threw up in here."

El gently smacks Max in the shoulder with the back of her hand. "Be nice," she says. "It's a wedding dress store. *Of course* it's lacy and fluffy."

"When I get married, I'm just going to wear a simple white dress," Max says. "None of this *extravaganza* bullshit." She gestures with waving motion of her hand at the sea of wedding dresses in front of them.

El grins, feeling cheeky. "Oh, so you *are* going to get married someday? Does Lucas know this?"

Max looks over at her, the look in her eyes flat and unamused. "Hopper, don't you start on me now. Besides, we're here for *you*, remember?"

El arches an eyebrow, but knows how to pick her battles when it comes to Max, so she drops it. *For now*.

And then a primly dressed sales associate walks up – perfectly coifed hair, pressed black slacks, a fitted white button down – and smiles. “Hi, you ladies have an appointment?”

“I do,” El says. “I called about a week ago? El Hopper, 11:00?”

The woman smiles and gestures for them to follow her. “Right this way. Let’s just get you checked in and then your stylist will be with you in just a bit!”

El’s appointment verified and checked in, El, Max, and Megan follow the associate through the store, past racks and racks of wedding dresses in all various shades of white, in all sorts of styles – so many, it’s almost dizzying – to the back third of the store where it’s essentially one giant dressing room. Small, cordoned off changing rooms are set up by raised platforms in front of three-way mirrors, each station surrounded by a few chairs, maybe a couch. There’s about three other brides and their entourages already undertaking their own search for a wedding dress, all giggling and oohing and ahing as each bride comes out in a new wedding dress.

“Your station is right over here,” the associate says, leading them to an empty station in the corner. “Your stylist is going to be Renee and she’ll be with you shortly, ok? Have a seat while you wait.”

El smiles. “Great, thanks!” The sales associate smiles and walks off, leaving El, Max, and Megan to sit down on the slightly worn, yet incredibly comfortable chairs.

“Well, at least they want us to be comfortable while we drown in frilliness,” Max says as she settles in, purse wedged between her and the chair.

“Max,” El says warningly.

Max chuckles. “Sorry, sorry.”

“You two,” Megan says, sighing even though she’s laughing a bit.

“Alright, which one of you is the bride?”

All three heads turn to look at the voice from behind them. “I am,” El

says, standing up. “Renee?”

The woman, shorter than El, if that’s even possible, Asian (Chinese?), black hair pulled back in a ponytail, smiles. “That’s me! Well, let’s get a look at you.” Renee gives El a once over, making El squirm a bit as she stands there, dressed simply in jeans and a sweater. “Your future husband’s a lucky man,” she says. “You’re beautiful. Great bone structure, nice, soft hourglass shape, gorgeous skin tone. Really, any dress in here is going to look stunning on you.”

“See?” Max says. “Told you.”

“Max!” El says out of the corner of her mouth, blushing fiercely at the way Renee complimented her figure.

Renee laughs. “Sorry, didn’t mean to embarrass you. I talk before I think a lot of the time. Well, El, why don’t you follow me and we can start looking at dresses. Do you have an idea of what you want?”

El follows Renee, leaving Max and Megan behind and, for about 30 minutes, El lets Renee guide her along through racks and racks of dresses, helping El narrow down styles. It’s hard because, as much as El has always thought – *known* – she was going to marry Mike, she’s never actually *thought* about what her wedding dress was going to look like. And there just feels like there’s too many options.

“So, when’s the wedding?” Renee asks a few minutes into their search.

“November 4th.”

Renee smiles. “Lovely, a fall wedding. Not cold enough yet to have to wear long sleeves, but still cool enough that you can if you want to. Are you getting married here in Chicago?”

El shakes her head, smiling. “No, we’re getting married back in our hometown, back in Indiana. It’s where we met.”

Renee giggles. “Aww, high school sweethearts?”

El giggles as well. “Something like that. We’re getting married on our 10 year anniversary.”

“Wow,” Renee says, eyebrows arching in astonishment. “That’s a long time for someone as young as you are.”

“We’ve been dating since we were 13,” El says with a shrug, like it’s no big deal.

But Renee lets out a soft, cooing noise. “Aww, that’s so romantic! Seriously, that’s sweet that you found your one person so young. And that you’re still in love.”

El smiles, the love she has for Mike warming every inch of her. “We are. I love him so much. I can’t *wait* to be married to him.”

“Well then,” Renee says, a conspiratorial smile curling up the corners of her mouth. “Let’s find you the perfect wedding dress, ok? One that will blow his mind.”

So, even as El feels very overwhelmed with the number of choices in front of her, she’s also excited as Renee expertly guides her through picking out a couple handfuls worth of dresses, in a few various styles and shades of white.

And then she’s back with Max and Megan and it’s time to try on dresses.

One thing no one ever told El about wedding dresses: they’re *heavy*. All the lace and satin and layers of tulle beneath the skirt and the train and the boning of the bodice. It feels like she’s wearing the girliest armor known to man. And they’re *bulky* in a way that El knows she’s going to need to practice walking around in (not that she minds, really – she feels like a princess in each one she tries on, even if none of them are the one quite yet).

As El tries on dresses, with Renee’s help and input from Max and Megan, they narrow down styles – off-the-shoulder, lacy but not *too* lacy, short train, just off-white. With each new parameter, Renee runs off to grab a couple of new dresses, each one closer than the last.

And finally, after a couple of hours of trying on dresses, El starting to get *really* tired of changing, she walks out of the enclosed changing room and, from the look on everyone’s faces, she knows *this* is the

one.

“Oh, El,” Megan says, standing up, Max hot on her heels.

“Yeah?” El says as she turns around to look at herself in the mirror.

“You’d be an idiot not to buy this dress,” Max says.

And then El sees herself in the mirror and she almost can’t breathe.
Oh.

It’s not just that she feels like a princess in this dress. She *looks* like one, too. Off white, delicate lace draped over the bodice, sheer thick straps hugging her upper arms, the neckline veeing gently in the back and the front, a soft, satin skirt flaring out gently, short train trailing behind her.

Oh my god.

El almost wants to cry – she feels like she’s going to any second, really – because *this* is the dress she’s going to wear when she marries Mike. And, suddenly, her wedding becomes *real* in a way it hasn’t before. This really is it. She’s getting married.

And she can’t *wait*.

El turns and smiles at Renee, who’s standing off to the side with a gentle smile on her face. “I’ll take it.”

Winter becomes spring, which turns into summer and every day that goes by is one closer to the day Mike and El get married.

There’s tuxedo fittings and bridesmaid dresses and debates about what music and the food and haggling with Karen about the guest list (she wants to invite *everyone*, Mike and El want to keep it small, they end up somewhere in the middle – *halfway happy*, El’s mind whispers at her, thinking fondly back through the years).

And, suddenly, there's no more planning left to be done. It's a little over a week out from the wedding and all that's left is the bachelor and bachelorette parties.

Max, of course, has planned El's (and she doesn't know if she's excited or scared or both).

But, really, if El's scared for *anyone*, it's Mike. Because part of the agreement for Lucas getting to be Mike's Best Man is that Dustin gets to plan the bachelor party. And he roped in *Steve* to help him plan it. El's morbidly curious about what *that* dynamic duo has in store for her soon-to-be husband, but, at the same time, she *really* doesn't want to know.

Really, *really* doesn't.

It takes Mike about 5 minutes to question giving Dustin permission to plan his bachelor party. And another couple of days to seriously *regret* it. Because Dustin gets *Steve fucking Harrington* involved and now there's a *knowing* in Dustin's eyes whenever anyone so much as mentions Mike's bachelor party.

It makes Mike fear for his very life.

Ok, ok, maybe that's a little over-dramatic. But this is *Dustin* he's talking about, here.

So, really, Mike feels completely justified in his fear.

And now it's the last Saturday of October, the night of his bachelor party, a little over a week out from the wedding (*oh god, he's getting married to El in **eight days**. He can't wait*).

They're at his house a little before 9PM, El and Max long gone off to whatever thing Max has planned for her – knowing Max, probably something obscene and penis-themed. The guys are drinking a beer before heading out and they're *all* there – Mike, Will, Dustin, Lucas, Greg, Steve, and Jonathan, all of them dressed in slacks and button

down shirts, no ties – when suddenly Dustin comes over, holding a blindfold in one hand.

The dread that's been living in Mike's stomach about this night for months? Yeah, it's just turned into a raging storm of anxiety. "Dustin, what's that?" Mike says, eyeing the black cloth like it's a snake.

"Michael, don't you trust me?" Dustin asks, grinning.

Mike narrows his eyes at Dustin. "Is that supposed to be a trick question? I feel like the answer *should* be obvious at this point."

Dustin gasps and the hand not holding the blindfold comes up to clutch at his heart. "That *hurts*, Michael. You've wounded me, cut me to the quick!"

Mike rolls his eyes and reaches out for the blindfold, snatching it from Dustin's hands. "God, you're so melodramatic."

Dustin grins. "Well, I was in Drama Club in high school, so...I don't know why you're surprised, really."

Mike sets his mostly empty beer bottle down on the kitchen counter and ties the blindfold around his head. "There, happy?"

"Yes, but you sound like you aren't," Dustin says.

"Don't worry, Wheeler," Steve chimes in. "We'll get you home in one piece."

"It's the emotional trauma I'm scared of," Mike says as he feels a couple pairs of hands wrap around his biceps.

"Oh, quit being such a baby," Lucas says.

Mike snorts. "When it's your turn to get married, I'm gonna *make sure* Dustin plans your bachelor party. See how *you* like it." He knows he's complaining, but he doesn't really care. Not as he's led outside, completely blindfolded, and *shoved* into the passenger seat of someone's car.

Mike sighs. *El, I hope you're having a better night than I'm about to.*

El hears Mike's sad, lost voice in her head, but she's on her second drink – a Mai Tai that is just about the best thing she's ever had – and it makes her amused more than worried. *Why? What's happening?*

I'm blindfolded and I don't know what's going on, Mike says, whining.

El hides her grin with her drink as she looks around the small, intimate booth she's in with Max, Megan, and Nancy (Kali respectfully declined the invite, not in the mood for a raucous night out). They're at a chic bar near downtown Chicago, all low lighting and dark wood paneling and wine red curtains and low jazzy music playing in the background, and all of them are dressed for a night out – short skirts, tight tops, strappy heels. They had dinner first and now they're at this bar for after dinner drinks. El's surprised *this* is what Max has planned for her, but she knows there's still more yet to come. *This is what you get for letting Dustin plan your bachelor party.*

Great, throw it in my face, why don't you.

"Hey, quit talking to Wheeler. No boys tonight, remember?" Max says, smacking El on the arm.

El pouts as she rubs the spot with the hand not holding the drink. "Ow, how'd you know?"

"You get this silly look on your face," Nancy says. "It's super obvious once you know what's going on."

El blushes. "Great, why didn't anyone tell me sooner?"

"Because you look so adorable, that's why," Megan says.

"Not fair," El harrumphs. "It's my bachelorette party. You're supposed to be nice to me."

"No," Max drawls out. "That's on your wedding. Tonight is about getting you shit-faced and making you reveal uncomfortable details about your sex life."

“Ew,” Nancy says. “Please, you’re talking about my brother.”

The smile Max gives Nancy is almost predatory. “Well, you knew what you signed up for when you agreed to come out with us. Don’t wuss out on me now, Wheeler.”

Nancy looks down at her drink – a vodka tonic – and downs the rest of it in one go. “I’m gonna need another drink. Or *five*.” Nancy slides out of the booth, leaving the other three behind.

“So,” El says. “You saying you’re going to get me drunk and make spill all my embarrassing secrets – which I’m not embarrassed about or uncomfortable with, by the way – but I’m only on drink number two and, well, I can’t imagine you’re going to want me to do this in a noisy, swanky bar.”

Max grins, which causes Megan to giggle, and wags her eyebrows. “Oh, just you wait, princess. The night’s still young.”

Oh, great, El thinks, looking at Max skeptically. What did she sign up for again, exactly?

Mike’s in one car with Dustin and Lucas, while the other four are in a different car, and he has no earthly idea where he’s going.

“Guys, come on, just a hint?” Mike knows he’s whining and wheedling, but he doesn’t care. Suffice it to say, he’s not dealing well with being *literally* in the dark about this.

“In due time, in due time,” Dustin says, gently chiding. “Patience, dear Michael. And remember, you’re probably going to regret being so eager to know what’s going to happen.”

Mike groans, head thumping back against the seat. “Oh god, there are going to be strippers, aren’t there?” It’s literally the *last* thing he wants at his bachelor party.

“You’ll see,” Dustin says in a sing-song voice as Lucas laughs from

where he's driving.

"I hate you all, by the way."

"Funny, because I'm lovable and adorable," Dustin says, flicking the back of Mike's head.

Mike reaches behind him to shoo Dustin away. "Ugh, *stop*."

"Guys, please, what are we, 12?"

"Yes!" both Mike and Dustin say in unison.

Lucas sighs. "Children, go figure."

"Oh, fuck off, Lucas."

"Yeah, fuck off, Lucas."

"Hey," Dustin says. "No copying me."

Mike grins, leaning into it. "Hey, no-" He's laughing by the time he feels Dustin's hand clap over his mouth and he can't resist the urge to lick Dustin's palm.

"Ugh, gross!" Dustin says, removing his hand in a flash. "That's it, I'm not going easy on you tonight, Wheeler."

"You mean it's been easy so far?"

The car stops and Lucas parks, killing the engine. "Alright, we're here," he says, effectively cutting off whatever reply Dustin had for Mike's snotty question.

Dustin lets out a laugh that's almost maniacal. "Oh man, you are *so* not prepared."

Mike gulps and straightens his shoulders as he hears the car doors open and Lucas and Dustin slide out. Whatever's about to happen, he's gonna take it like a man, he swears.

...He hopes.

They have a few more drinks each at the swanky bar before Max tugs on El's arm. "C'mon, Ms. Hopper, time to go."

El looks down at her last drink – a lemon drop, this time – and throws back the last couple of sips. It's her 5th drink and she's feeling *good*. "Ok, ok." It takes her a bit to slide out, the bare backs of her legs sticking a little to the leather of the booth, but she manage to stumble out, catching herself on Megan when she almost overbalances.

"God, I forgot what a lightweight you are," Max cackles, looping her arm through El's to help keep her upright. "Just...don't try climbing me like a tree like you do to Wheeler, ok?"

El giggles. "Psh, you're not tall enough for me to climb."

Nancy links through El's other arm. "Right, closed out our tab. Where to next, Max?"

At this, Megan grins. "My place. It's only a couple blocks from here."

El frowns, her forehead furrowing. "Wait, we're not partying all night?"

Max laughs. "No, we're not partying all night *out*. Alright, let's go, girlie. Time for you to meet your doom."

"Oh, *god*," El groans as Max and Nancy lead her out of the bar, Megan just ahead of them.

"So, you're getting married in 8 days," Nancy says as the night air engulfs them. "We're going to be like sisters."

"Sisters-in-law," El says, leaning her head on Nancy's shoulder for a second in an affectionate gesture.

"To be fair," Nancy says. "You've been part of the family for a while. I think almost all of the pictures Mom has of Mike from age 13 on

have *you* in them.”

“He doesn’t like having his picture taken,” El says, giggling. “Don’t know why. Whenever I ask, he says it’s because he takes horrible pictures, I think he does it on purpose sometimes, you know? Or he’s just really self-conscious, I haven’t figured out which.”

“Hmm, well you get a lifetime to figure it out,” Megan says, her smile bright beneath the light from the streetlamps.

“A lifetime,” El sighs. “I can’t wait.”

“Oh god, this is getting sappy,” Max says. “Change the topic, please!”

Megan laughs. “Ok, how much shit do you think the boys are giving Mike right now?”

El guffaws. She doesn't *know* what Dustin has planned for Mike - she never would have been able to keep the secret - but she can only *imagine*. “He’s going to regret letting Dustin plan his bachelor party.” She pauses, looking over at Max with narrowed eyes. “I’m not gonna regret having you plan this night, am I?”

Max just grins. “We’ll see how hungover you are in the morning.”

“Fucking great,” El sighs, feeling loose and lightheaded from the 5 drinks she’s already had. “You get to hold my hair if I puke.”

Max laughs. “Whatever you say, Ellie.”

The conversation is light and happy as they walk down the wide sidewalks, heels clacking on the ground, all smiles and teasing and laughter. El’s having the time of her life, surrounded by her friends, tipsy and relaxed and unable to stop giggling.

Almost before El knows it, they’re walking into the lobby of Megan’s apartment building, Megan giving the doorman a bright wave, and into a mirrored elevator. The quiet of the elevator is a sharp contrast to the bustling sounds of the street and El lets out a soft hum. “S’nice,” she says. “Quiet.”

“Oh, no, you are *not* flagging on me now,” Max says, reaching out to

slap El's face.

But El freezes Max's hand inches from her face with her powers and pouts. "No hitting," she says, letting go of Max's hand. "And I'm *fine*."

"Oh, you better be," Max says as they get out of the elevator on the 4th floor.

El just rolls her eyes as they walk down the hall and wait for Megan to open the front door to her apartment.

Max practically *pushes* El through the open door and El's jaw drops when she sees what's inside.

Megan's apartment is nice – bright open windows, lush and comfortable furniture, light hardwood floors.

But someone – *Max* – has streamed a banner across the entrance to the kitchen that reads, "Congratulations, bitch!" in bright, party-themed lettering and there are balloons and streamers all along the walls and ceiling.

And, in the middle of the coffee table, straight ahead, is a large bottle of vodka and 4 shot glasses. El suddenly has a *horrible* feeling and she turns to Max with what must be confused horror written all across her face.

And Max just fucking *smiles*. "Welcome to Truth or Shot, Ellie dear."

There's a lot of noise and way more confusion as Mike lets Lucas and Dustin lead him out of the car and into...a restaurant? There's the loud signs of people eating – silverware on plates, the distant sounds of a kitchen, the loud din of conversation – and Mike just has to trust that neither Lucas or Dustin are going to let him run into a table or a waiter or something.

Right, because what I need now is more embarrassment.

But then, the noise begins to fade behind him as they move past the main dining area of the restaurant and the sounds of Mike's footsteps makes it sound like they're in a hallway. Then, Dustin and Lucas stop, forcing Mike to stop as well. "Alright, Mike, you ready to take off the blindfold?" Dustin asks.

Mike snorts. "I was never ready to wear the damn thing in the first place so, yes, I'm *absolutely* ready to take off the blindfold."

A hand reaches behind his head and tugs the blindfold up and over his head. Even though the light around them is dim, Mike still squints against it anyway, bright compared to the darkness of the blindfold. Still, he takes stock of the situation and tries to figure out just what the hell is going on. They're in a dark hallway, dark wooden walls and dim, recessed lighting. In front of him is a pair of glass French doors, the glass curtained from inside by thin white curtains. Mike can see the light spilling from the other side and he can hear voices through the door, the sound punctuated by laughter. He looks between Lucas and Dustin, both of whom are now standing in front of him, smiling expectantly. "Ok, what's going on?"

Lucas and Dustin each grab a doorknob of one of the doors and Dustin lets out a laugh, sounding a little too excited. "Michael Theodore Wheeler? Welcome to your Roast."

Like they practiced beforehand or something, Lucas and Dustin throw the doors open at the same time, revealing the large private room beyond.

It's lit by the same recessed lighting, punctuated by candles that are on the 5 or 6 tables around them. There's about 20 people in the room – their college suitemates, guys from Robotics club, other guys from various classes they've had over the years, Will and Greg, Steve and Jonathan – all smiling over at him, cheering.

But, what catches Mike's gaze is what's directly across from him. Light brightly from the bulbs above it, is a giant, wing-backed chair – just the gaudiest thing Mike's ever seen, all garish gold trim and bright red velvet upholstery – with a low podium next to it, clearly set up so people can give speeches.

And Mike knows what's about to happen. "Oh my god, I hate you all."

Dustin reaches for a table just inside the door and comes back with a horribly tacky plastic king's crown in his hand. He plops it on Mike's head, looking way, way too proud of himself. "Your throne awaits, my liege."

"Please don't call me that."

But Dustin's ignoring him now. "The guest of honor has arrived!" he calls out to the room and the cheering only gets louder.

Mike's shaking his head as he finds his feet carrying him forward – with maybe a little nudging from Lucas behind him. There's hugs and clapping handshakes and "Congrats, man," as he moves into the room, guided by the flow of people around him to that horrible, *awful* chair.

Mike's resigned to his fate by the time Dustin's pushing him into the chair and he sits with a heavy plop. Seconds later, Steve comes by with a beer, condensation just starting to gather on the glass of the bottle, and presses it into Mike's hand. "Here, man. You're gonna need it," Steve says with a wink as Dustin turns around to face the rest of the room, hands gesturing for everyone to quiet down.

Mike resists the urge to chug the bottle in his hand and instead confines himself to taking a single sip.

And then Dustin starts speaking. "Welcome, everyone, to the bachelor party for one Mike Wheeler. As I'm sure some of you are aware, he's soon to be married to the wonderful, vivacious, beautiful El Hopper – who he doesn't really deserve, might I add." Dustin pauses and the room fills with low laughter. "For those of you who don't know, Mike and El have been together for almost 10 years – 10 happy, *nauseating* years. Well, happy for them, nauseating for the rest of us, that is. Yes, as much as we love Mike and El, there's no denying that they've subjected us to outrageous public displays of affection, grotesque making out, or even *worse*, as they continuously rub their happiness in all of our faces. Well, now's your chance to get even, everyone. Give us your best, *worst* Mike and El stories, make him feel

embarrassed for all the nauseating romance he's rubbed our noses in for the past 10 years!" There's another pause as the room cheers and Mike can feel himself turning bright red already. *Oh god, this is what karma feels like.*

"But, in all seriousness, before I go. One sincere moment before the festivities begin," Dustin says, turning to look at Mike. "Mike, man, honestly, everyone here is super happy for you. You and El deserve the world and I know that, whatever life brings you, it's going to be with her at your side. Congrats, man." Dustin comes over and Mike stands to hug him for a brief moment. Then Dustin pulls away, that maniacal grin re-fixed on his face, and he turns back to the room. "Let the roasting begin!"

"Truth or Shot? Uh, Max, what's Truth or Shot?" El wished she didn't sound so skeptical or scared, but....

Max pulls El further into Megan's apartment as Megan shuts the door behind all of them, before Max sits El down in the plush armchair that's been situated to face the couch. "Easy. We ask you questions. You give us your answers. If we think you're lying, or if we just don't like your answer for whatever reason, you take a shot."

"Oh god, I'm going to die of alcohol poisoning," El groans as she gets seated in the armchair, looking across at Max, Megan, and Nancy sit across from her.

"I'll make sure you survive," Nancy says as she grabs the bottle and pours out four, tidy shots. "My mother would never forgive me if I let her future daughter-in-law die a week before the wedding."

El gives Nancy a flat look. "Thanks, Nancy. I appreciate that."

Nancy grins. "Any time, El."

"Alright, alright," Max says, waving a hand. "Less talking, more handing out booze."

“Geez, aren’t you bossy,” Nancy says.

“Does that turn Lucas on, or something?” Megan teases.

Max blushes, but the smile on her face speaks less to embarrassment and more to satisfaction. “Or something,” she says coyly before she looks over at El. “Now, we’re going to start you off with something easy: tell us about your first kiss.”

El rolls her eyes. “I think everyone here *knows* that story.”

Megan grins. “I don’t.”

“Yeah, I don’t think I do, either,” Nancy says.

El blinks. She hadn’t realized *Nancy* didn’t know. And so, holding a shot glass full of vodka primly between her thumb and first two fingers, El tells the tale of her and Mike’s first kiss – before she really knew what a kiss was, in the cafeteria of Hawkins Middle, right before everything went to hell on that horrible night. Thankfully, the judge’s panel in front of her deems her story “truth” and she doesn’t have to take a shot.

But, as Max ratchets up the questions – “What’s his most annoying habit?”, “What’s your favorite part of his body?”, “Did he cry the first time you had sex?” – the answers, though all truthful (much to El’s reddened cheeks and Nancy’s disgust), get sappier and sappier and Max starts making El take shots for, and quote, “just how disgustingly in love that answer was”.

But the coup de grace comes towards the end of the evening. El’s had about 6 shots so far and, added with the 5 drinks she had at the bar earlier, the world’s feeling *really* good and El knows enough about her body to know that she’s drunk. So, when Max asks this last question, the 12th so far, El has absolutely no filter left in her anymore.

“What’s the kinkiest thing you two have ever done?” Max asks, her speech a little slurred as well, her smile a little too bright and loose.

Nancy cringes. “Ugh, that’s it. I don’t know if I want to know the answer to this question. I’m going to the bathroom.” Nancy gets up

and, on wobbly legs, makes her way to the bathroom down the hall, leaving just Max, Megan and El in the living room.

“Right, spill, Princess,” Max says. “Kinkiest thing you’ve ever done. Go.”

The answer immediately comes to mind – El remembers, *god* does she remember – and she feels her face flush from the memory. “So, you know how Mike doesn’t like not being in control?” El asks, lips twisting in a grin. And, when Max and Megan nod, she continues. “Let’s just say that I used my powers to hold him down one night while I had my way with him until he begged. It was...*amazing*.”

And, *god*, it was. She’d teased him for almost an hour, holding him down with nothing but her mind, torturing him with her mouth and hands until he was pleading, *begging*, for her to let him go. And still, she held him down as she straddled his waist, her body *slowly* moving over his. And, when she took pity on him a few minutes later and *finally* let him go - his body straining beneath her, every muscle and tendon tight with tension - he’d all but lost control as he flipped them over and *ravaged* her. She’d borne the reminders of that night for days in the bruises in the shape of his fingertips on her hips and the ache in her thighs. And every time they looked at each other, there was that extra layer of *knowing* between them – knowing of just how badly she could make him lose control, knowing of just what he was capable of when he lost it. The thrill of it is always between them now, just a heartbeat away, and it’s delicious.

There must be too much of the memory written on her face for everyone to see because Max gags a bit and Megan looks a bit shell shocked. “Oh, god,” Max says. “That’s it, game’s over. I immediately regret asking that last question. God, I really didn’t need that mental image in my head, I *really* didn’t.”

El giggles. “You asked,” she says with a shrug.

“Yeah, and now I regret.”

“Regret what?” Nancy asks as she comes back into the room.

The timing is so good and the looks on Max and Megan’s faces are so

horrified that El just loses it, arms wrapping around her waist as she laughs uproariously. And as El laughs, she realizes just how lucky she is to have these people in her life, realizes just how much she loves them.

And she wouldn't change any of it for the world.

...except for the hangover she'll have the next morning. *That* she'll gladly change.

This must be what it feels like to die from embarrassment.

Mike spends what feels like the entire evening with his face buried in his hands, face beet red, as, one after the other, his friends, the Party and otherwise, get up to tell stories about him, but mostly about him and El, and most of *those* about times they caught him and El being overly affectionate in public or they walked in on him and El making out or overheard them having sex.

See, Mike knows he and El are very affectionate people. This is not a surprise to him.

What is surprising is a) just how much other people have noticed and, b) that it seems that *everyone* has noticed. Somehow, he and El have become That Couple, that one couple that is always all over each other and just sickening the hell out of everyone else around them.

Not that this is going to change how Mike acts around El – he'd have better luck reversing the polarity of the earth's magnetic field – but, *man*, it's an experience having it all thrown in his face and having everyone cheer and jeer at the stories that are shared in the room.

Steve gets up and tells everyone the story about catching him and El shirtless in the back of the station wagon, where the only reason why Steve hadn't been able to see El's exposed breasts was because Mike's mouth and hands were covering them.

Dustin gets up and tells the story about catching him and El in the A/

V room – again, both of them shirtless; again, Mike covering the more intimate parts of El’s body with his own.

Jonathan tells everyone about the time he came home during winter break from college and caught Mike and El on the couch with El’s hands down his pants.

Lucas’ story is tamer and more a collection of stories of all the times Mike and El were caught making out in high school – from the first day of high school where he kissed her in front of *everyone* to the two of them getting caught by the janitor making out in the supply closet (where they summarily got detention and the rest of the Party laughed at them for *days*) to the time Mike and El sported matching hickeys during freshman year and it was the talk of the school for a week after that.

And then Will gets up – sweet, kind Will – and Mike thinks that maybe, *maybe* he’s about to get a reprieve. Will’s the only one who hasn’t spoken and Mike starts to think that, *finally*, this nightmare might be coming to an end (and Mike really hopes, there’s only so much beer he can drink to numb the sharp edges of the embarrassment and he’s starting to really feel the effects).

But all Mike’s hopes are dashed when Will gets up there and opens his speech with one simple question: “Show of hands, how many people in here have walked in on them doing it?” Almost every hand in the room goes up and Mike really just wants the floor to open up and swallow him whole. *Will, I believed in you and this is how you betray me?*

“Alright, alright,” Will says. “Not *everyone*, but a good portion of the room. Glad to see it’s not just me.” Will pauses, looking over at Mike with what Mike can only describe is a devilish smile on his face. It’s becoming clear to Mike that it’s all a lie that Will is the nice one. No, Will’s the most conniving of them all.

Then Will turns back to the rest of the room. “I don’t know how many of you are aware of this, but El is my sister – well, step-sister, but I think of her as blood – and I lived with her from when our parents got married when we were 14 until just before junior year of college, so about 6 years or so. Which gave me the honor – or horror,

take your pick – of having a front row seat to just about every aspect of their relationship. Including some of the things I’m sure they never wanted me to see, things I’m going to share with all of you now only because I’ve had enough alcohol to stomach talking about sex and my sister in the same sentence.”

Will turns to look at Mike. “Do you remember, Mike, the first time I walked in on the two of you having sex? Imagine my shock to come home to find the two of you in her bed, her on top of you – I don’t even want to describe what it looked like, much less what it sounded like – but I think you stopped long enough for me to close the door before you were going at it again. And I know because I could hear you. A brother should never know what his sister sounds like having sex, Michael. *Never*.”

At this, Mike snorts. “Tell me about it,” he says.

“Hey!” Steve and Jonathan both call out and Mike just flips them off.

“But that’s not the *only* time I’ve caught the two of you going at it, is it? Mike, remember Thanksgiving break, sophomore year of college?”

Mike pales. Oh god, he remembers. “Will, I don’t think-”

“Ah, ah, ah,” Will says, holding up a finger to silence him. “This is my time to speak, Mike.” He turns back to the crowd. “See, I guess they were feeling particularly *horny* before dinner that night. And, El’s room was just too far away, even though it was upstairs. So they decided to have their little tryst in the downstairs bathroom. Only they didn’t lock the door. All I wanted to do was wash my hands and, with the kitchen occupied with my step-dad making dinner, I decided to use the downstairs bathroom. So, I opened the door...”

Will pauses for dramatic emphasis. “And was greeted by the sight of my sister sitting on the bathroom counter, her shirt long gone – thankfully still wearing a bra – with Mike’s head up underneath her skirt. And, guys, I don’t think it takes too much imagination to picture what he was doing. I mean, I wouldn’t know *exactly* – I’m gay, so no part of me is every going to get near a woman’s genitalia. But, I can hazard a guess. And, again, not something you ever want to know about your sister.”

Mike knows he's long past beet red at this point – his face feels like it's on fire – and he really wants to crawl into a hole. He thought Will was never going to bring that up *ever*, that Will would be too embarrassed about catching Mike going down on El to ever breathe a word of it. *Guess alcohol really does loosen tongues, doesn't it?*

"I've caught the two of them in compromising positions more times than really I care to recall – and it would take me all night to tell all the times and then I'd have to drink myself to death to clear the memories from my brain – but I do want to tell about the *worst* time I caught them." A low "oooh" rumbles through the room and Will's eating this up from the way he's smiling, like he's finally getting what he's earned for having to carry these memories around.

"It was a couple months after the Thanksgiving break incident. We were all living in this house that we shared with the six of us – I know everyone in here has heard us refer to us being 'the Party' and for a year, we all lived together. Mike and El ostensibly had not just their own room, but their own small separate building. They lived in the mother-in-law suite, which means they had their own living space and everything. They *promised* to keep their little sexcapades out of the main house. And I don't know how many of you are aware of how important the word 'promise' is to us, but it meant something when they promised. Mike, would you like to tell everyone if you kept your promise?"

Mike glares. "Fuck you, Byers."

"Hmm, sorry, spin again, Wheeler. See, I had come home early from class one day in early February and I was supposed to have the house to myself – everyone else had class and I was looking forward to the peace and quiet. But when I walked through the front door, guess who I found on the family room couch."

"If you hadn't come home early, none of this would have happened!" Mike argues.

"But I did. And what did I see on that couch, Michael? Oh, that's right, the two of you. Completely naked. With El kneeling on the floor as she went down on you. So I got to see my sister's bare ass and my best friend's dick all in one day, two things I never want to

see ever again.” By this point, Mike is slumped so low in the stupid chair he’s in that he’s practically on the floor. *Oh my god, just shoot me now. It would be a mercy.*

“There was a lot of scrambling for clothing once they realized I was there. And I can guarantee we got a new couch and burned the old one. No one wanted to sit on it after that.”

“You didn’t have to tell the rest of the house,” Mike says, glowering.

“Oh, but I did, Mike. I did. It was a public service. Really, I was just being a responsible housemate.”

“Oh my god, are you done?”

“You begging for mercy, Mike?” Will asks.

“Bet you El makes him beg!” someone calls out and Mike feels like he’s going to be permanently red as his heart leaps into his throat, panic filling his veins. There’s no way anyone knows about *that*. *No. Way.*

Will shudders. “Please, I don’t want to know about what kinky shit they get up to. My sister is a devious woman and if I think about it too hard, my brain’s going to melt out of my ears.” The laughter in the room, which has been a constant background noise to Will’s speech, crescendos to a fever pitch before Will signals everyone to quiet down.

“But, seriously, for as much shit as I’ve given you tonight, Mike, there’s no one I’d rather El be marrying than you and there’s no one I’d rather be marrying you than El. The two of you give me hope for the future. It’s plain to see just how much you love each other and I hope you always love each other as much as you do right now. Congratulations to the both of you.”

The room erupts in applause and Mike gets up as Will comes over the two of them meeting in a hug. “Ok, you can still officiate the wedding,” Mike says so only Will can hear.

“Please, like El would let you kick me off that duty.”

Mike laughs. "You're right, she wouldn't. She loves us too much."

"Guess that makes us both lucky, doesn't it?" Will says with a smile.

Mike's smile stretches so broadly, he can feel his cheeks starting to hurt. But he can't help himself – he just loves El too much and can't even begin to understand how he got so lucky to have her in his life in the first place. "Yeah, the luckiest."

The next day, both Mike and El are paying for their nights with the worst hangovers they've ever had. For Mike, after the speeches were over, he graduated from beer to bourbon as everyone wanted to celebrate with him. And, for El, those 6 vodka shots plus the cocktails from earlier in the evening were just too much for her body to deal with.

They spend most of Sunday curled up in bed together, the shades drawn, trying to sleep the worst of it off.

It's only once the sun is just about setting that both of them start feeling human again. "Ugh, this sucked," Mike says as he and El move around the kitchen, making breakfast for dinner – eggs and toast, both easy foods on their still sensitive stomachs.

"Tell me about it," El says, agreeing with a sigh. "How's that always go? 'I'm never going to drink like that ever again?'"

Mike laughs a bit. "Yeah, and then you forget just how bad it was until the next time."

El giggles. "Exactly."

They eat in companionable silence, ankles entwined beneath the dining room table, sharing soft smiles and loving glances. And after, as El clears the table and gets started on the dishes, Mike comes up behind her and wraps his arms around her, burrowing his head against the curve of her neck. "This time next week, we're going to be married," he says, voice hushed with awe and excitement.

El leans back against him and relishes in the steady heat of his body. "You ready for that?"

"Feel like I was *born* ready," Mike says, dropping a soft kiss on the curve where her neck meets her shoulder. "It's all I've ever wanted, really."

"Me too," El says with a voice that's growing thick with emotion. She turns around in his arms and looks up at him, smiling dopily. "Hi," she breathes.

Mike smiles back, bright enough to outshine the sun. "Hi. You're pretty."

El snorts. "Please, I'm wearing pajamas and my hair's a rat's nest."

"Still pretty," Mike says. "Always pretty."

The butterflies that always seem to be El's constant companion flood her once more, making her heart feel buoyant. "You're sweet."

"You make it easy."

El reaches up and kisses him, her lips moving softly over his, both of them moaning softly as their mouths slant over each other, fit neatly against each other. And El breaks the kiss, pulling back far enough to murmur against his lips, "I think the dishes can wait, don't you?"

"Oh, absolutely," Mike says in return, lips brushing against hers. "Race you upstairs?"

El doesn't even bother replying as she slips from Mike's grip and takes off to the sound of Mike's indignant cry. "I didn't say 'go', yet!" he says, hot on her heels.

"Snooze, you lose, Wheeler!"

He catches up to her when they're just inside their bedroom, wrapping his arms around her and picking her up to toss her onto the bed. El explodes in a flurry of giggles and she looks up in time to feel Mike crawling up over her body, looking down at her with just the giddiest, most lovesick look she's ever seen.

“You’re a dirty cheater,” he says.

“Yeah, but you’re marrying me anyway,” El says, raising one hand to slide into the hair above the back of his neck.

“Damn straight, I am,” Mike says before he leans into kiss her. And, as El lets herself get lost in him, as she so frequently does, a whisper in the back of her mind can’t help but remind her: *next week, they’re getting married.*

And she can’t wait.

They go back to Hawkins early Friday morning, cars loaded up with everything they’re going to need for the wedding, El’s dress carefully hidden in Lucas’ car as Max is guarding it with her life.

Everyone is giddy with excitement and anticipation dances along every nerve. Everything is ready to go, now they’re all just waiting for it to happen, counting down the hours at this point.

Mike and El go to the Wheeler household after dropping her stuff off at her childhood home – Karen’s hosting the soon-to-be in-laws for dinner and El just wants to spend time with Mike at his old house.

Karen’s all hugs and smiles as Mike and El walk inside. “You’re here!” Karen exclaims as Mike and El find her in the hallway, on her way to greet them.

“Hi, Mom,” Mike says, going over to give her a hug.

“Hi, sweetheart,” Karen says before she slips from his grasp and goes over to El. “And, El. Hello, dear.”

“Hi, Karen,” El says as Karen sweeps her up in her own hug.

“Are you ready for Sunday?” Karen asks.

El giggles. “I sure hope so.”

“Because, you know, there’s still time to back out,” Karen teases.

“*Mom*,” Mike sighs, rolling his eyes.

“I’m just funning, Michael,” Karen says, chiding, even though she’s smiling. “Really, I’m excited. You’re getting married!”

“Really, I didn’t know,” Mike says, full of snark.

El lightly backhands him across the arm. “Haha, you’re not funny.”

Mike grins. “I thought that was hilarious.”

El raises an eyebrow as she looks at him challengingly. “Really? You wanna start this weekend off on this particular foot?”

Mike’s grin softens. “No, guess I don’t,” he says, but he’s still smiling and El can’t help but smile back.

“Oh, you two,” Karen says, cooing. “Well, it’s about lunch time. Have you guys eaten yet?” Karen rushes off to make them lunch, Mike helping, and for a few hours, it’s the three of them hanging around the Wheeler household, talking and relaxing.

A little before 3, Karen gets up from where they’re all sitting in the family room. “Well, I’ll be back soon. I need to pick up Holly from school.”

El grins. “Oh, I’ll go get her, Karen. You two stay here.”

Karen smiles. “I’m sure Holly would much rather have you pick her up than me,” she says. “Thank you, El.”

“Really, it’s no trouble,” El says. And it’s true. She loves the youngest Wheeler sibling – always has, really, and knows that Holly loves her too. “I might take her out for ice cream though, make a girls’ afternoon of it, is that ok?”

“Just as long as she doesn’t ruin her appetite for dinner, have fun!”

El presses a quick kiss to Mike’s lips, grabs the keys from him, and is out the door with her purse in hand a minute later, on her way to

pick Holly up from Hawkins Middle.

Really, there's no better sound than the last bell of the day on a Friday afternoon.

"Finally," Holly mutters under her breath, excitement beginning to pick up in her veins. She's *free* for two days. Two *glorious* days without classes, where she can sleep in and not give a crap about school.

Also, her nerdy brother's getting married, so that's pretty cool.

Holly hefts her backpack over one shoulder and walks out of math class with a sigh of relief.

"Holly, over here!"

She's only a few steps out into the hallway when she hears the sound of her name being called and Holly turns to see her best friend, Mark, coming up next to her. "Hey, Mark, TGIF, am I right?"

"Seriously," he says, grin bright beneath a head of sandy blonde hair that's just a shade lighter than hers. Holly keeps waiting for the day when her hair will turn the same dark brown shade of both her siblings, but that day never seems to come.

"You have any plans for the weekend?" Holly asks.

Mark shrugs. "Nah, probably just sleeping and pretending my homework doesn't exist. You?"

Holly smirks. "My brother's getting married on Sunday."

"Huh, cool."

"What's cool?"

Holly looks over to see her other best friend, Tim, coming over to

walk with them. Holly knows her mom would really love it if her best friends were girls instead of boys, but Holly's always gotten along with boys better, anyway. *Girls have too much drama.*

"Holly's brother's getting married this weekend," Mark says. "You have to be in the wedding?"

"Yeah, I'm the flower girl," Holly says. "El asked me to."

"El?"

"My nerdy brother's fiancée. She's way cooler than him, so I don't get it, but whatever," Holly says with a shrug. And really, she loves Mike, but he's a giant *nerd* (and, really, the emphasis should be on the word 'giant' but she doesn't remember a time when he wasn't over 6 feet tall). And El is just *cool*. She's gorgeous and funny and sweet and everything Holly wants to be when she grows up. Plus, El's always been there, always with a kind word or ready to do something with just her, making her feel like a grown up in a way no one's ever made Holly feel like before.

"Love knows no bounds, Holly," Tim says, grinning, as they walk out into the afternoon sunshine. "Maybe your brother's like, a sex god or something."

Holly shudders, feeling like she's going to be physical ill. "Ew, gross," she says, gagging. "Do not ever say that ever again, Tim. Not unless you want me to beat you into the ground."

"Knew that'd get her," Tim says, holding out his hand for Mark to high five.

"You two are idiots," Holly says, rolling her eyes.

"Yeah, but you love us, anyway," Mark says.

Tim stops walking. "Um, guys? Who's that?"

Mark stops. "Whoa, she's *beautiful*."

Holly rolls her eyes again – *boys* – and turns to look where they're looking. And her face explodes in a smile. "El!"

A hand reaches out to grab her by the arm and Holly looks over at Mark. "Wait, that's the woman you're brother's marrying? She's a freaking model!"

El's standing, leaning against the passenger door of the car she and Mike share, arms loosely crossed over her chest. She's wearing a simple pair of jeans and a soft, V-neck sweater under a loose wrap, and her hair, which Holly has always envied for how lush and wavy it is, spills down her shoulders. And then El sees Holly and her face lights up with a smile.

"Oh god, she's smiling at us," Tim says weakly.

Holly sighs. "She's smiling at *me*, dumbass."

But El's on her way over and her two best friends are ogling her future sister-in-law. *Well, this is fantastic.*

Still, Holly can't help but smile as El comes up to them. "El, hi!" she says.

"Holly!" El exclaims, arms outstretched for a hug that Holly gladly falls into. El's only an inch or two taller than she is and it's easy to hug her. She has memories of El carrying her around the house, of running and throwing herself at the older girl so El would pick her up. And she would, each and every time.

"You're picking me up?"

"I offered," El says. "Thought we could make an afternoon of it, just the two of us, whaddya say?"

Holly can't stop smiling. "That sounds *awesome*." Tim clears his throat next to her and Holly remembers that her friends are there. "Oh, El, these are my best friends, Mark and Tim," she says, gesturing to each of them in turn, both of them making mooneyes at El.

El smiles at them and Holly can practically hear them swooning. "Nice to meet both of you," she says, shaking each of their hands in turn.

"Nice to meet you, too," Mark says, voice trembling and cracking a

bit in a way that has Holly biting the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing at.

“Uh, yeah, Nice to meet you,” Tim echoes.

“Well, I’ll see you two on Monday,” Holly says, completely over watching her best friends fall in love with her brother’s fiancée. “Come on, El,” she says, grabbing El’s hand. “Let’s go.”

El offers one last wave at Mark and Tim before she goes with Holly over to the car. “Your friends seem nice,” El says.

Holly offers her a small smile as she climbs into the car. “They’re ok,” she says. “Better than most people in this school.”

El climbs in behind the wheel and gestures for Holly to buckle her seatbelt. “Sometimes, that’s all you can do,” El says. “So, I was thinking we could go get some ice cream before heading home. Sound good?”

The smile on El’s face is conspiratorial and so happy, Holly can’t help but smile back the same way. “Ooh, can we also get fries?”

El lets out a laugh. “You got it, Holly Bell.”

For the next hour, El and Holly eat ice cream and fries, laughing and giggling. Holly confides in El about her fears of high school the next year, about the crush she has on Jason Warner, who’s on the baseball team and is just the dreamiest, and about all the gossip around town that Holly’s heard from her mom that El might have missed. El listens and offers advice and just is the best future sister-in-law Holly could possibly imagine.

And later, when they get home and after Mike attacks Holly with a giant bear hug, lifting her up and dangling her over the ground, she watches as Mike reaches for El, the two meeting in a kiss that, despite how Holly rolls her eyes, she has to admit is sweet. It’s like they just fall into each other, each time just as amazing as the last even though she knows they’ve been together forever.

Turns out, as much as she thinks Mike is still the biggest nerd to walk the face of the Earth, she’s still so very happy for him.

*El's still too cool for my brother, though. **That** will never change.*

Saturday is full of last minute preparations – getting nails done, checking to make sure that there are no final alternations needed to be made to dresses or tuxes, doing final walkthroughs of the venue and confirming the guest count with catering.

The wedding rehearsal goes off without a hitch, except for Will cracking jokes about the speech he's going to give during the ceremony and El giving him a death glare that Mike is so glad isn't turned towards him. But he mostly spends the rehearsal staring dreamily at El, who's wearing a pretty sleeveless teal dress, fitted tight around her torso and flaring out to a full skirt once it hits her hips.

And he can't stop staring at her during the rehearsal dinner, even as she snuggles up against his side, his arm wrapped around her shoulder, as their family and friends talk and laugh around them.

Less than 24 hours now, El says in his head. Getting cold feet?

Mike breathes out a laugh that is all but inaudible. *Never. You?*

That's funny. You're never getting rid of me. El turns her head to look up at him, her lips curled upward in a soft smile.

Mike's moving before he's even aware of it, kissing her like it's all he's meant to be doing, ignoring the groans and jeers around them. *Good.*

After dinner, with El dropped off at her childhood home – he's really not a fan of this whole 'spend the night before you get married apart' thing, but it is what it is, he supposes – Mike spends the next hour building a surprise for El, the excitement in his veins rich and heady. He's getting *married* tomorrow and it's like he's living a dream he never wants to wake up from.

Surprise built, Mike sneaks out of the house through the basement

and begins the short drive over to El's house. *Hey, be ready to sneak out in about 10 minutes*, Mike announces, reaching for her through their connection.

Mike, we're not supposed to see each other until tomorrow, El chides, but she sounds amused and curious and it makes Mike's heart skip a beat as he smiles.

Whatever, like we've ever lived by anyone's rules before. Will you be ready or not?

El giggles and the sound of it echoing in his head is one of Mike's favorite things on the face of the planet. *Let me know when you pull up in front of the house.*

10 minutes later and El's sliding into the passenger seat next to him, wearing flannel PJ pants and one of his old sweatshirts, her hair pulled up in a messy bun. "This better be good, Wheeler," she says, teasingly. "I need to get my beauty sleep."

"Like you need to be more gorgeous than you already are," Mike says with a grin as he turns the car around and goes back the way he came.

"Charmer," El says, reaching for his hand.

Mike glances at her out of the corner of his eye. "Only for you." He weaves his fingers through hers, giving her hand a squeeze as their clasped hands rest on the center console.

There are no words spoken until Mike pulls up in front of his parents' house and El sighs next to him. "Mike, what are we doing here?"

Mike smiles over at her. "I have a surprise for you."

El levels a look over at him. "Mike," she says, warningly.

"I know, I know, you hate surprises," he says. "Luckily, I won't make you wait long. C'mon, inside. Let's go."

Once they're both out of the car, Mike grabs El's hand again and leads them around to the back of the house to the door into the

basement.

And, once they're safely inside, the lights turned down low around them, Mike shows El what he built for her: their old blanket fort. "Ta da!" he says softly.

El gasps, turning to look up at him with tears in her eyes. "You did this for me?"

"I'll take you back to your house in a couple of hours, or whenever, but I just thought you'd appreciate it," Mike says, unable to stop smiling. For a moment, a flash of memory assaults his brain – the first time he built this fort for her, when they were much smaller, her dressed in his clothes, her hair shaved close to her head, looking small and lost and scared, him kneeling in front of her as he asked her what her name was – and, for a moment, Mike is rendered temporarily breathless.

Then El smiles up at him and he forgets entirely what it means to breathe. "I love you," she says, reaching for him.

"Love you, too," he says, letting her curl her fingers into his t-shirt and pull him down to her, their lips meeting in a soft, quiet kiss.

"Let's go snuggle in the fort," she says after she pulls back and drags him over to the small palace he built for her.

There's only so much room Mike had to build it in, so it's still a little cramped, but it's perfect as Mike drops the blanket that covers the door over the opening and then it's just the two of them in a small cocoon, the world outside the blankets unimportant and meaningless.

Mike lays on his back while El lays snuggled up against him, her head pillowed in his shoulder. "Do you think everything's going to change? Once we're married?"

Mike breathes out a quiet laugh. "Yeah, but for the better, I think," he says, dragging his fingers gently up and down the length of her upper arm through the fabric of her (his) sweatshirt. "Legally, we're going to be practically one entity. We're going to be a family, El. Besides, then I get to tell the whole world I love you."

El snorts. “You do that already.”

Mike grins. “True, true. But I’ll be able to do it with a ring on *my* finger, too.”

El hums and turns so that her chin is propped up on his chest, her arm curling so that her hand drapes over his opposite shoulder. “You’re such an incurable romantic, Mike Wheeler,” she says, grinning.

“Hey, I’m *your* incurable romantic,” he says, gaze dancing over her face, marveling at the way she’s smiling at him, all beautiful and happy and content.

“My incurable romantic,” El echoes back. “I like the sound of that.”

It hits him like a punch to the heart that he absolutely *has* to kiss her or he’ll die, the urge overwhelming and overpowering. So he does, his hand sliding into her hair to hold her close while he captures her lips with his. El breathes in a gasp against his lips and Mike chases it, gently shifting them so that he’s hovering over her, his arms bracketing her.

They make love one last time in the blanket fort, all soft giggles and breathy moans, the whisper of skin to skin the only language they need in this moment. Because, in the end, they don’t need anything other than each other. She’s his world and he’s hers and that’s all that matters.

After, they’re still all smiles and giggles as they get dressed and Mike drives her home. He drops her off, walking her to the door, stealing one last kiss before she disappears up the porch steps and into the house.

And Mike watches her go until she disappears completely from view, knowing that the next time he sees her, she’ll be walking down the aisle towards him, ready to become his wife.

The sun rises on Sunday, November 4th, 1994 into an overcast sky, the air heavy with the promise of rain.

El's not worried, though, as she looks out the window of her childhood bedroom at the sky, all thick clouds that linger ominously above and through the trees, wrapping the world in mysterious silence.

She and Mike met in the rain. It's only fitting that they get married in the rain, too.

Besides, they're having an indoor ceremony, so there's no chance of being rained out anyway.

There's a knock on her door and El calls out over her shoulder. "It's open!"

El turns around as the door opens to see Joyce standing in the doorway, a gentle smile on her face. "Good morning, sweetheart," she says.

El goes over and gives her step-mom a hug. "Morning, Joyce."

"You ready for you big day?"

El smiles. At noon, less than 5 hours from now, El Hopper will become El Wheeler and she's so excited, she can barely contain herself. "I think I've been ready my whole life, Joyce."

Joyce's smile turns tremulous. "I'm so happy for you, El."

"Thank you, Joyce."

Joyce leans in to press a kiss to El's forehead, stretching up a bit to do so. "Now, come on, let's get some breakfast in you. You need to eat. It's going to be a long day."

It's 10 o'clock, two hours to go until the ceremony, and Karen can't stop hovering as Mike gets ready.

She can't help it, though. Her baby boy is getting *married*, married to a wonderful young woman who loves him with all her heart.

Karen just knows that she's going to cry the second the ceremony starts. *Thank god for waterproof mascara.*

Already dressed for the ceremony in a long-sleeved, dark green dress that hits just below her knees, Karen moves down the hall and knocks on the closed door to bathroom. "Mike? How's it going in there?"

The door opens a second later and Mike grins. "Good, except the tie. Wanna help me again?"

Mike's dressed except for his jacket, cufflinks, and bow tie, standing in the bathroom wearing his dress pants, tuxedo shirt, and vest. He looks relaxed, not at all nervous, but there's an air of excitement that surrounds him and Karen's proud of him, proud of the man he's become, confident in the love he has for the woman he's about to marry, eager for the life they're going to build together.

Karen feels the tears spring to her eyes and she's so not ready to deal with her tears quite yet. *I thought I'd have more time.*

But she smiles, heart feeling full to the point of bursting. "Of course I'll help you, sweetheart." It's just her and Mike in the house. Ted and Holly are over at the lodge where the wedding is taking place, Ted to oversee since it's his membership that got them the spot, and Holly to get ready with El and the other girls.

So it's quiet as Karen steps forward and takes the ends of Mike's bow tie in each hand and works at tying the knot. She breathes out a laugh, remembering the last time she did this.

Mike looks down at her, brow furrowing. "What's so funny, Mom?"

"Chin up, please," Karen chides, Mike dutifully lifting his chin so she can keep working on the tie. "Just remembering the night of your senior prom, the last time I helped you tie a bow tie."

Mike laughs. "Yeah, I remember. Still haven't figured out how to do this myself, as you can see."

Karen lets out a giggle. "I'll just teach El how to do it. I'm sure she'd be more than happy to tie these for you in the future."

"Right," Mike says with a snort. "I think she prefers *untying* them to tying them, though."

"Don't be crude, Michael," Karen says, eyebrow arching in reprimand.

Mike grins. "Sorry, Mom," he says, clearly not at all sorry from the tone of his voice.

Karen finishes tying the bow tie seconds later and takes a step back to look at her handiwork. "Not bad," she says with a smile. "Now, hand me your cufflinks."

"You wanna do my hair, too?" Mike asks, still grinning.

"Don't tempt me," Karen says pointedly. Besides, it looks fine from where Karen's standing. Mike's managed to slick it back in some semblance of tame. And, if need be, there's always going to be the ability to fix it before the wedding photos.

They're quiet as Mike hands over the cufflinks and Karen slips them in to Mike's cuffs one at a time and, when Karen's done, she grabs both of Mike's hands in hers, her fingers encircling his wrists, the backs of his hands overshadowing the shape of her cupped palms. "Mom?" Mike's voice is soft, but curious.

Tears spring to Karen's eyes and she looks up at her son, sniffing a little as she tries to keep herself under control. "I'm just so proud of you, Michael," she says softly. "You've turned into a fine young man. And now you're getting married. I'm just...I couldn't be happier."

Mike smiles and there's a myriad of emotions reflected in the expression – joy, wistfulness, surprise, serenity. But, for a moment, Karen can see him as he was as a little boy, all smiles and wide-eyed joy, eager and loving. There's so much of that boy in the man in front of her and it takes all Karen has in her to keep from bursting into

tears.

“I’m glad you’re happy, Mom,” Mike says. “I almost can’t believe I’m here, marrying her. I love her so much.”

“Then I have no doubt the two of you are going to be happy. Because she loves you, too, Mike.”

Mike looks at her and breathes out an incredulous laugh. “Right, yeah, I know.” He takes in a deep breath, clearly overwhelmed by the majesty of the day. “Ok, let’s go get me married.”

The dressing room at the lodge is a soft, luxurious affair – sprawling couches, embellished vanity mirrors, soft curtains over tall windows. Max, Megan, Nancy, and Holly are all in the room with her, chatting and talking amongst themselves as they get ready, Max and Nancy in their sapphire blue bridesmaids dresses, Holly in her ice blue flower girl dress. But El’s barely noticing any of those details. She’s too busy staring at her reflection in the full-length, free standing mirror, marveling over the transformation that’s taken over her.

She feels *magnificent*. The dress makes her look like a princess, showing off the delicate sweep of her collarbone, shining against the natural tan of her skin, hugging close to the curves of her torso. Her hair spills gently down her back, half of it pinned up in a loose swirling knot, decorated with a flower-shaped jewel pin. Her makeup is elegant, lightly shimmering, soft and ethereal. She’s never felt more beautiful in her entire life.

“How are you doing?”

El turns at Max’s voice. “Little nervous, I think. Or maybe just excited.” She smiles, glancing over back at herself in the mirror. “I can’t wait to be married, Max,” she says, her voice hushed, like if she says it too loudly, she’ll jinx it or something.

“Less than an hour, now, Ellie,” Max says. “You really do look

beautiful. Like everything a bride should be.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, Wheeler’s gonna flip when he sees you,” Max says, nudging El’s shoulder with her own.

“Max,” El sighs with a click of her tongue. “He is not.” But El knows her protestation is weak, even false

“5 bucks he cries when he sees you.”

El looks over at Max, holding her gaze for a long moment. “Make it 10 and you have a bet.”

There’s a knock at the dressing room door and El turns to see Joyce poking her head in. “The guests have all arrived. Are all of you ready in here?”

El looks to the rest of the bridal party, and gets nods of assurance from each of them. Smiling, El looks back at Joyce and nods. “Joyce, would you go get Hop for me? I want a moment alone with him, before we start.”

Joyce smiles. “Will do.” She looks at the rest of the room’s occupants. “Alright, everyone who’s not getting married today, come with me.”

El smiles at everyone as they leave and then she’s alone, her last moment alone as an unmarried woman. She turns back to the mirror and resists the urge to reach out for Mike. She can feel him, close, not more than 30 feet away and, moreover, she can feel his excitement, his happiness. And she finds herself filled with the same excitement, the same happiness, both her own and the reflection of Mike’s echoing inside of her. He wants this, wants this the same as she does, and any hint of nervousness that she had just fades away, leaving only those joyous emotions in their wake.

She’s ready, she’s *beyond* ready to be married to him. And she smiles, feeling that excitement well up inside of her.

Well, then, let’s get me married.

Jim lets Joyce lead him to the dressing room where El is. He's dressed to the nines – tuxedo, boutonniere, the whole bit – ready to walk his little girl down the aisle.

Not your little girl anymore, though.

"She in there?" Jim asks as he stands in front of the solid wood door.

Joyce nods. "Yeah, she's waiting. Just go on in. I'll have Megan out by the end of the hall waiting for you guys. When you're ready, just let her know and she'll kick everything off." Joyce rises up on her toes and presses a quick kiss to Jim's cheek. "Good luck."

Jim smiles. "Not me who needs the luck."

Joyce laughs. "Oh, I wouldn't be so sure of that," she says, winking, before she turns away and heads back down the hall, her heeled footsteps echoing off the wood paneling.

And then it's just Jim, alone in front of the door. He looks at it and sighs, feeling the tremble in his hands, the way his heart beats rapidly in his chest. He's nervous and excited and happy and...not sad, but wistful, maybe? It's the start of a new point in his life, in El's life, in Mike's life, too. The joining of their families, formally and officially.

Jim refuses to think of El getting married as him losing a daughter. No, he's officially gaining the son he gained a long time ago, maybe even as far back as that day, 10 years ago to the date, when Mike released all the anger and sadness he'd been holding for the year leading up to that and broke down in front of Jim. Jim remembers hugging the kid, all scrawny and full of spitfire, just 5'4" of pain and misery and so very much in need of someone to comfort him, even if it happened to be the man who kept the girl he was in love with away from him for almost a year.

A lot's changed in 10 years, Jim thinks, a smile stretching his lips. All

of it for the better, though.

Jim lets out another sigh, this one happier, and knocks on the door to let El know he's there before opening it.

"El, honey, it's me," he says, stepping into the room-

-and freezing when he sees her.

El turns to look at him, a smile on her face, shaking her head slightly. "Dad, close the door," she says, a little exasperated, but mostly fondly.

"Oh, right, uh, sorry," Jim says as he hurries the rest of the way inside and shuts the door behind him, all without looking away from El, who's looking radiant and so grown up and just *beautiful*, it takes his breath away. "Oh, Ellie," Jim breathes.

A thin sheen of tears shimmers across El's eyes, but they don't come close to falling. "How do I look?" she asks, looking almost shy, almost like a girl at odds with the woman she's turned into.

"You look beautiful, El. Just stunning," Jim says, voice thick with emotion, as he walks over to her, arms opening up for a hug that El easily falls into. He wraps his arms around her, presses a soft kiss to the crown of her head, and tries very valiantly not to cry.

"Thanks, Dad," she says, soft, just as emotional as he's feeling.

"You're gonna kill Mike, by the way. He's going to faint when he sees you."

El lets out a laugh and pulls back, smiling even though her eyes are still glassy. "Why does everyone always say that?"

Jim shrugs. "Because it's true. That boy's over the moon for you and everyone knows it. It's as plain as the nose on your face."

El's face scrunches up. "Not particularly fond of that saying. Is it the nose that's plain or the fact that everyone can see it so it's obvious to see?"

Jim laughs, the sound fed by the giddiness bubbling up inside of him. “Fuck it, then, don’t ever use it.”

El throws him a wry look. “Thanks, Dad,” she says.

Jim’s laughter dies down and he shakes his head a bit. “So, Joyce said you wanted to see me?”

Drawing in a deep breath, El nods. “Yeah, I did. I just....” She looks up at him, smiling softly. “I just wanted to thank you for everything. For taking me in, for giving me a home, for being my dad. I know I didn’t make it easy – I mean, what parent signs up for a telekinetic daughter – but I don’t think I’d be here without you, Dad, I really don’t.”

Jim swallows roughly and feels the tears well up in his eyes as he hugs her again. “I would do it all over again in a heartbeat.”

El wraps her arms around his torso, holding him tight. “I love you, Dad.”

“I love you, too, Ellie. So much.” He holds her for a bit longer, relishing the feel of her in his arms – his strong, beautiful, kind, *amazing* daughter, who’s grown so much and has come so far from when he first met her in ways that there are not enough words to say just how proud he is.

But, the moment ends and, even though both of them are a bit teary eyed, none of them look any the worse for wear. And Jim smiles. “Well, kid, are you ready to get married?”

El lets out a laugh, eyes crinkling with happiness as she smiles so wide, it’s almost blinding. “Let’s do this.”

The morning passes by in a blur, an excited, *impatient* blur.

Mike gets to the venue at about 11:20, dropping his mom off to go mingle with the guests who have already started arriving. Will,

Dustin, and Lucas are already there, each of them dressed in matching tuxedos, perfectly coifed.

“Hey, man, you ready?” Dustin says as Mike comes over to them.

“Psh, he was ready 10 years ago,” Lucas says, rolling his eyes.

Dustin laughs. “Sorry, stupid question.”

“So, how are you feeling?” Will asks.

Mike smiles. “Excited, ready, like I’m going to explode with happiness, take your pick.”

“Dude, you need to calm down,” Lucas says. “Or you’re going to vibrate through the floor.”

“Sorry, man, no can do,” Mike says, laughing. “I’m about to marry the woman I love. There’s no stopping this now.”

Will rolls his eyes. “Why did I agree to be your officiant?”

Mike shrugs, though he can’t stop smiling. “I don’t know, Byers, but no backing out now. El would kill you.”

“Man, she so would,” Dustin says, voice a little breathy with awe. After all these years, and she’s still their superhero and they will never stop being in awe of that.

They stand around, talking for a little while longer, when, eventually his mom comes over to force them to mingle with the guests. “I know it’s your wedding day, but that’s no excuse to be rude,” she says, giving Mike a look before gliding off, all Chanel perfume and coifed hair.

So, Mike mingles, smiling and shaking hands and making small talk, thanking people for coming. All the while, he can feel El, feet away, so close he can practically reach out and touch her.

And, both before he knows it and *finally*, he sees Megan come out from the hallway that leads to El’s dressing room, a smile on her face as she comes up by Dustin’s side. “We’re ready.” She looks at Mike,

winking. “Good luck.”

Mike can't stop smiling. It's official, he's going to be smiling for the rest of his life. “Don't need it, but thanks.” Megan slips away and Mike turns to Lucas. “You have the rings?”

Lucas pats his breast pocket. “Got'em right here, man.”

“Alright, places, everyone,” Dustin says, grinning. “These are your last minutes of bachelorhood, Mike.”

“Not gonna miss them,” Mike says with a small laugh.

Lucas and Dustin disappear, the guests are all practically in their seats, and now it's just Will and Mike standing up at the altar. Will turns to look at Mike, smiling. “So, welcome to the family?”

Mike shakes his head, still laughing a bit. “You mean, I wasn't already?”

Will rolls his eyes. “You know what I mean.”

But, whatever reply Mike could have thought up gets swallowed as the music gets started and he sees Holly start down the aisle, delicately dropping handfuls of flower petals down the white runner that stretches the length of the aisle.

Mike watches, heart pounding in his chest, as first Dustin and Nancy, and then Lucas and Max walk down the aisle, each pair arm in arm. He can feel El getting closer, the distance between them shrink.

And then the music changes once more, everyone stands and Mike can't look away.

He sees Hop first as the man rounds the corner from the hallway. But then, Mike's eyes slide to the left, to Hop's right arm-

-and he sees *her*.

And Mike Wheeler's heart forgets what it means to beat.

His chest feels tight, leaving him breathless. He feels untethered from

gravity, like he's just going to float away, like all earthly laws of nature no longer apply to him.

Because El's walking towards him, smiling so bright as she carries a bouquet of lavender roses and Mike knows, surely as he knows that he loves her, that no one in the history of time has ever been more beautiful than she is right now.

She's *stunning*, a vision of white and lace and soft skin and luscious curls and he can't believe she's marrying him, that she's walking towards him, about to become his wife.

He's the luckiest man alive.

Mike can't tear his eyes away – *never* wants to, in fact, as she and Hop approach. He only looks away as he feels Hop clapping him on the shoulder. Hop gives him a small smile and a nod before he leans over to kiss El on the cheek.

And then he's slipping away and El takes his left hand in her right, squeezing it lightly. *Take a picture, it'll last longer*, she says, eyes glistening with the sheen of unshed tears even though she's still smiling so, so bright.

Mike almost bursts out laughing. *That's what you want to go with on our wedding day?*

El's smile turns almost coy, playful. *Hmm, maybe you're right. How about, hi handsome?*

That's more like it. He squeezes her hand back, entwining their fingers. *Hello, beautiful.*

As one, they turn to face Will, who's smiling at them with a mixture of happiness and incredulous exasperation. "You two," he says under his breath, almost laughing, before he speaks up so that everyone can hear him.

"So, I think these things are supposed to start with 'Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today', but Mike and El asked me to officiate their wedding, so they already weren't doing things the way they were supposed to be doing. Which, when you think about it, is how

they've always done it. From a middle school romance all the way to today, on the day of their 10 year anniversary, Mike and El have always forged their own path, leaving all of us to watch in awe as they conquered every obstacle, every up and down together. Mike and El didn't just grow up next to each other, they grew up with each other, and their relationship has only grown with it."

Will pauses, breathing deeply, before focusing on Mike and El. "The two of you have gone through things we can only imagine and have come out the other side so much stronger for it. You two amaze me every day with the love you have for each other and if I can be anywhere close as happy in my lifetime as you two are every day you're together, I will consider myself beyond blessed. I wish you two nothing but the utmost happiness and I'm honored that I get to be by your side to see all the amazing things you two are going to do together. I love you two, so much."

El's squeezing Mike's hand so hard, it's almost painful, but Mike understands. Because he feels similarly overwhelmed, and so, so lucky that he has Will in his life.

Will breathes and smiles, looking over at Lucas. "The rings?" Lucas silently hands them over, placing them in Will's open palm. Will nods his thanks before looking at Mike. "Michael Wheeler, do you promise to take El Hopper as your lawful, wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forth, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do you part?"

Mike looks over at El, sees her looking up at him, eyes wide and breathless. For a moment, he can't speak, he's almost so overwhelmed. This is it. This is *finally* it. And then he opens his mouth to speak. "I promise." The words are spoken low, with the weight of a million meanings, each and every one of them true, each and every one of them he means with all his heart.

"You may place the ring on her finger," Will says, softly, like he doesn't want to break the spell that's surrounding them.

With trembling fingers, Mike picks up the ring they picked out together, a simple white gold band with diamonds set in a thin channel, before he takes her left hand in his, sliding the ring gently

onto her finger to the sound of her hitching gasp. *Don't cry*, he tells her. *If you cry, I'll cry.*

No promises.

"And El Hopper, do you promise to take Michael Wheeler as your lawful, wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forth, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do you part?"

El looks up at Mike, smiling almost deliriously, before she nods. "Promise," she whispers through lips that are trembling just a bit and the very last piece of Mike's heart clicks into place.

"You may place the ring on his finger." El grabs Mike's ring from Will's palm and, like Mike did before, she grabs his left hand and slides the ring on his finger. The weight settles around his finger like it's been missing his entire life and Mike knows he's smiling like a fool and he just doesn't care.

Not when El takes his other hand in hers and looks up at him, so in love and so beautiful. He wants to live in this moment for the rest of his life.

Will's smiling so broadly at this point that he could power the sun for a month, Mike swears. "Then, by the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife." Will chuckles. "Mike, kiss your bride before she kisses you."

Mike certainly doesn't need to be told twice. He pulls free from El's handhold and, with his own hands trembling, cups her cheeks before he leans in and kisses her, kisses his *wife*.

El's hands come up to curl around the lapels of his jacket as she leans up into this kiss, gasping against his mouth.

And they're both smiling, smiling so hard it's almost impossible to maintain the kiss. But Mike's not cutting this moment short for *anything*. Not when her mouth is soft against his, feeling both like coming home and for the first time all at once. Not when she's kissing him back like he's everything she's ever wanted.

I love you, he whispers into her mind. *I love you so much.*

I love you, too, she says. *Forever and ever.*

People are cheering and clapping, but Mike really doesn't care as he pulls back from the kiss and looks down at El. "Hello, wife," he says, almost laughing with the happiness that's bubbling up inside of him.

El giggles, bright and beautiful and heart-skippingly happy. "Hello, husband," she says, sounding almost breathless with the force of the words. "We made it."

Mike leans forward, his forehead pressing against hers. "Yeah, we did. We *really* did."

It's been 10 years to the day since she came back into his life and Mike stopped counting the days they were apart. It's been 10 years of love and laughter and joy and sorrow and fear and uncertainty, 10 years of growing and learning together, 10 years of *being* together. Mike would gladly take forever with El, would gladly take an eternity of 10 years with her, knowing that he'll never, *ever* get enough of being with her.

And, no matter what comes their way, Mike knows they'll handle it the way they've handled *everything*.

Together. Always together.

The End

Notes for the Chapter:

Ok, I'm crying over here. I FINISHED A FIC OMG. But, I'm sure if you made it this far, you're wondering what's next. So, without any further ado, announcing:

together, you and i (could teach love a thing or two)

When El Hopper, former principal dancer for the

American Ballet Company and new holder of a bachelor's degree in developmental psychology, gets a job at St. Ignatius Preparatory School in Chicago as the dance teacher and guidance counselor, she's excited to marry her two passions: dancing and helping kids.

She doesn't expect to develop a crush on Mike Wheeler, the cute Physics/Chemistry teacher.

But, when she and Mike are assigned to be faculty supervisors for this year's Winter Ball, she finds herself getting closer to him in ways she never expected.

Mike, for his part, is just trying not to embarrass himself in front of the pretty dance teacher and finds that that's a *much* taller order than he could have ever anticipated...